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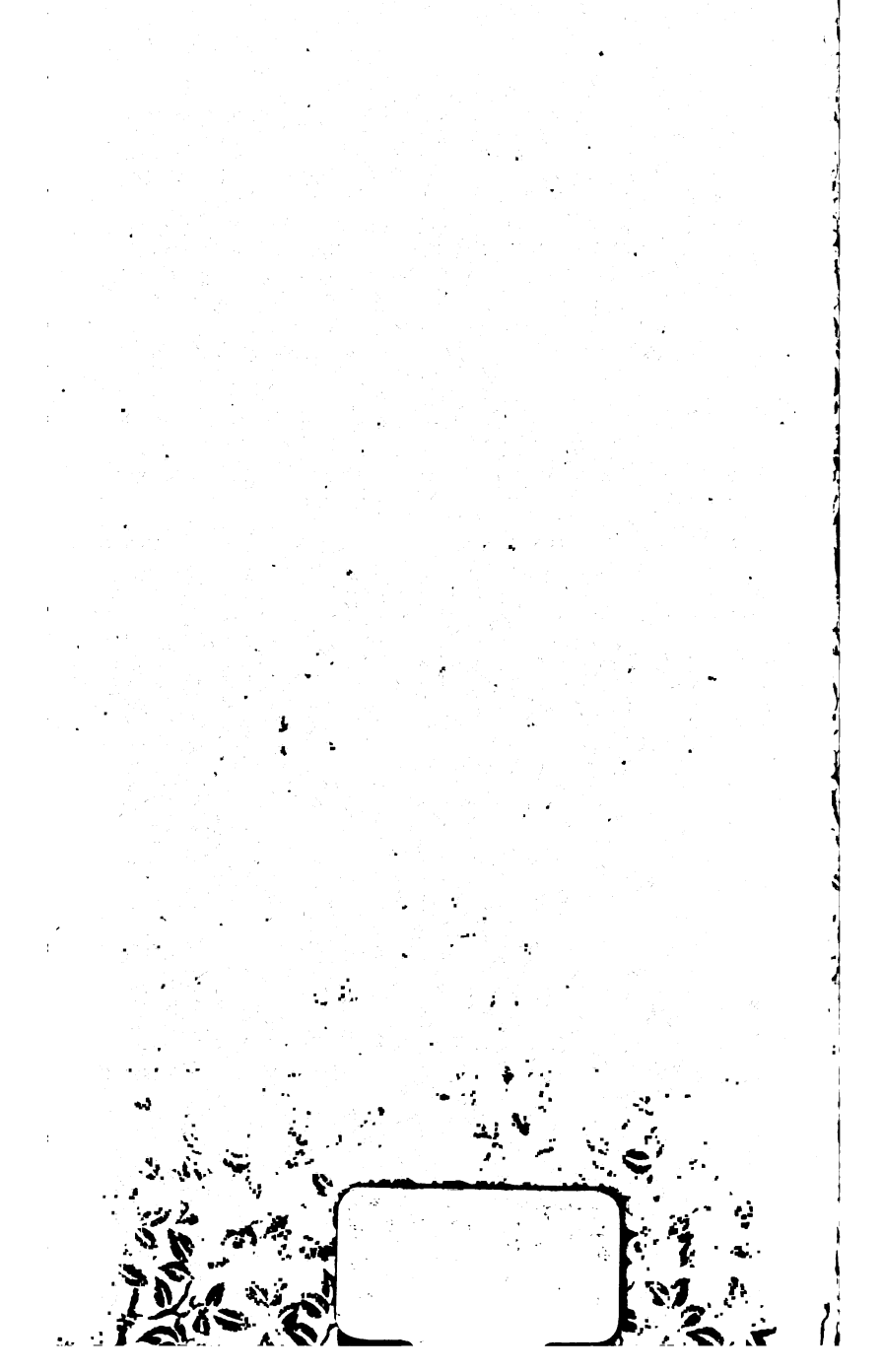
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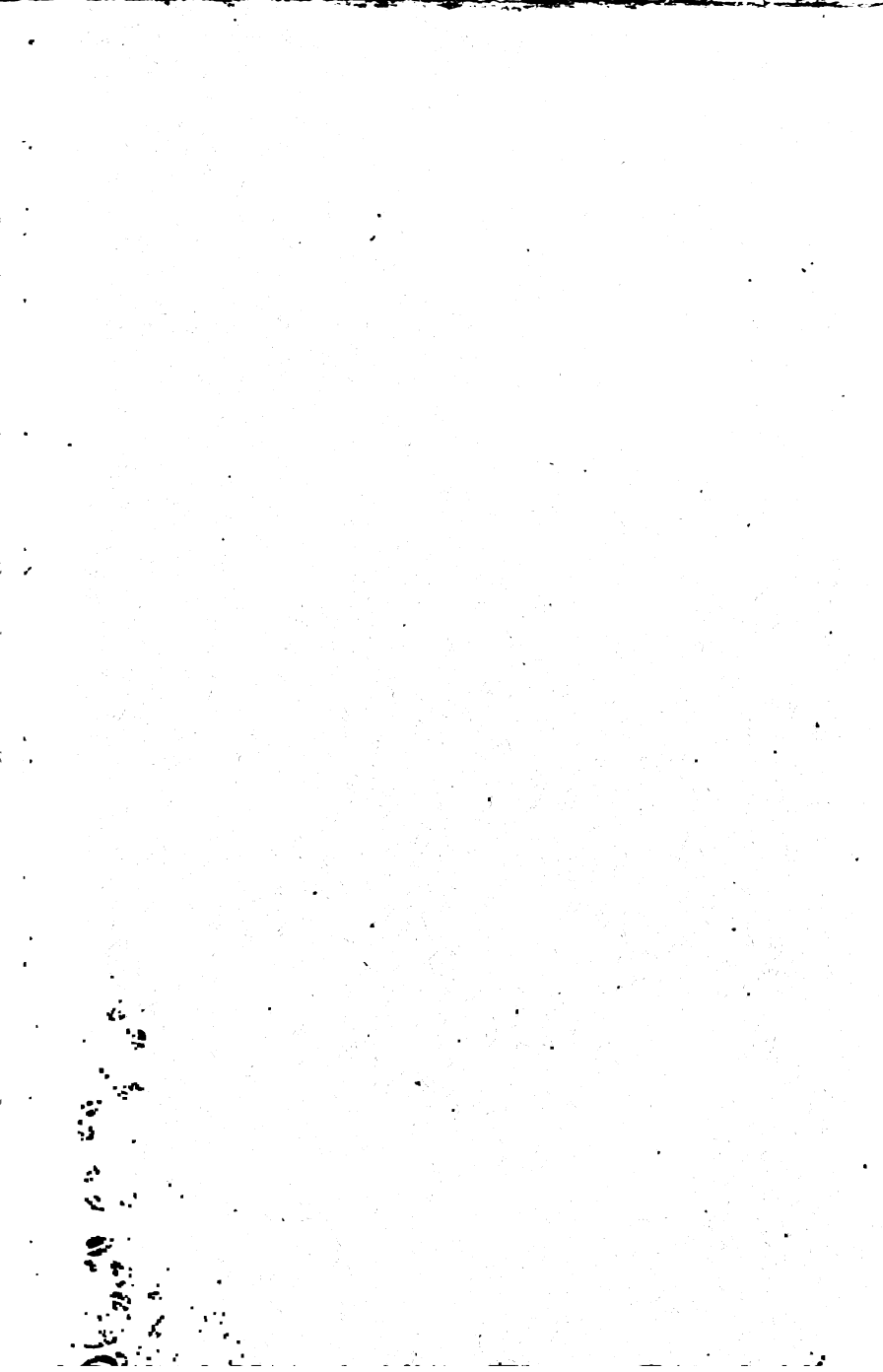
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BEAUTY
AND
THE BEAST







BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

A Fable

By SARAH TYTLER

AUTHOR OF 'THE BRIDE'S PASS,' 'WHAT SHE CAME THROUGH,'
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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

CHAPTER XVII.

HAY-MAKING AT WHITEHILLS.

IRIS awoke next morning from an unsatisfying sleep, in which she was haunted by a vague sense of something wrong, some impending family strife and convulsion. She did not feel the slightest necessity for being gradually lowered into a wholesomely sober and tranquil mood. She was as low as she could be without the tranquillity, amidst the sense of vanity of vanities, among the stale and flat relics which are apt to belong to the ball of last night, though at twenty-one the languor of fatigue is not added to the debt which has to be paid.

There was no use in Iris's thinking of not

going to Whitehills, however awkward and terrible the hay-making might present itself to her in anticipation.

She could not feign bodily illness which she did not feel, and though she had felt it, she had a vivid perception that Lady Fermor, who was out of humour already, would have scouted any ailment short of the disfiguring eruption of small-pox or the dangerous revelations of delirious fever. She would have dragged Iris in her train to Whitehills a half dead offering to its master, should he condescend to accept it.

Iris could not beg off from the expedition like the Mildmays—Mrs. Mildmay on the score of a severe headache, and Mr. Mildmay because he had business letters to answer, and some other things to attend to, before he left with his wife next day.

‘More prying to do,’ Lady Fermor commented behind his back. ‘Well, they are no loss, a couple of kill-joys, he with his stupid pomposity, and she with her die-away airs.’

Tom Mildmay’s excuse to himself was: ‘That match is not made up yet, from what I saw last night, and surely I am not called upon to put myself out of my way to push

the girl's interests or hatch the old woman's chickens.'

There was only one small comfort of which Iris could avail herself. She arrived at a clear understanding with Lucy Acton, as she had come to an explanation with Lady Thwaite.

'There is not one word of truth in the story that I am to marry Sir William Thwaite,' she impressed on Lucy with solemn earnestness; 'only I fear grandmamma wishes it,' she added, with a fall in her voice and an involuntary tight interlacing of her fingers. 'But I could not do it, even for grandmamma; my duty to her and to poor grandpapa does not absolve me from my duty to myself; to Sir William, and to God, Lucy. He ordained marriage as the nearest, most sacred tie, a relationship we might not enter into lightly, with divided minds. Think how unlike Sir William and I are, with not a taste, very likely not an opinion or principle, in common.'

Lucy listened, startled, while Iris continued to speak in the same unnaturally grave, almost portentous, tones.

'I don't mean that he is a bad man; very likely he is far better than I am, since he has

stood so great a change in his fortunes without breaking out into any extravagant or outrageous conduct. But have you forgotten how we used to talk of him, and laugh and wonder whether he would put his hat under his chair, and what he would do with his gloves and handkerchief?' asked Iris, with a reproachful, wavering smile. 'A worse than half educated, under-bred man—a man rustic and dull, as one might fairly expect, and very possibly arrogant and vulgar-minded, though he has had no great opportunity of showing it, and I never suspected it till last night,' said Iris in her truthfulness. 'Oh! Lucy, how could I marry such a man? How could you ever think it?'

'I beg your pardon, dear, if I have hurt you,' Lucy apologised in a convicted voice. She was sorry, not only because she had brought herself the length of making up her mind to the match, hardly for the sake of her subscription lists, since, to do her justice, Lucy was a good deal more of a woman than a secretary, but because she happened to be a practical sensible girl, largely trusted by her elders. Young though she was, she knew something of the sad reasons, with which Iris

was very partially acquainted, why it would be by far the happiest prospect for Lucy's friend if she could find herself early and safely settled in life. Supposing Iris could have brought herself to entertain a suitable regard for Sir William, and he were the worthy, plain fellow that Lucy had been persuading herself for the last twelve hours he undoubtedly was, here would have been a grave difficulty joyfully solved at once.

But, of course, it was for Iris to judge, and if she could not of her free-will look on Sir William in the light of her future husband—which was not surprising, after all, poor child!—it would never be her friend Lucy who would use pressure on Iris's inclinations. Lucy would leave that to Lady Fermor. Lucy would even aid and abet Iris against her formidable grandmother, so far as the welfare of the Rector and the parish would let so good a Churchwoman endanger it for any private and mundane matter. However, the affair was unfortunate altogether, and Lucy feared with some reason there were hard times in store for Iris.

As for Iris, she was still capable of thankfulness for small mercies. It was a relief to

think Lucy would not come to her again and speak of Sir William with the forced, sanguine praise Lucy had adopted last night. Iris had a sense of support in the conviction that Lucy would help her when she could, in keeping out of his reach at the hay-making, were it but to atone for the pain which her friend's credulity had given Iris. Such an atonement would be a hundred times better than any amount of apologies for causing Iris a passing mortification.

The girls had fixed to wear nearly similar gowns—white, with blue ribands for Iris, and pink for Lucy. But when Iris appeared before her grandmother, she was summarily dismissed to change her dress.

‘You look too washed out this morning for that childish white frock, girl. What a wretched constitution you must have, to be tired out by one ball! I have danced seven hours and driven to the Derby or the Oaks, and danced again, and gone to a breakfast at Richmond, without being a hair the worse of it. Put on anything rather than that white rag to make an exhibition of your sickliness; which is only a bad trick, after all, for you can walk to Knotley or Mistley Down and

back again, and feel no worse of it, when you choose.'

Though Iris was prepared to be miserable, though she despaired of pleasing her grandmother this morning, she had not attained the age when vexation and worry merge into personal hopelessness, and there is a certain listless, half-bitter satisfaction in being utterly indifferent to externals. Iris had still the feelings of her kind, in seeking, however unhappy she might be, to comply with her obligation to the world in making the most of her personal advantages, and looking her best under difficulties—whether in public or in private. It seems perverse of Iris, for, apart from her grandmother's wishes, it ought to have served the girl better to wear sack-cloth and ashes, and look in harmony with her attire. Instead, she put on a garment of mixed dark and light blue, which set off her fair complexion, even in its dimness and waxenness, this morning. She tried on a straw hat with maize ribands, which warmed her present lack of colour, and removed from the pale pink in her cheeks the slightest strain of sallowness. If she were no longer like the red, red rose, she was like the maiden's blush,

whose very faintness of tint is exquisite, and competes successfully with the hue, 'angry and bright,' of its brilliant sister.

Lady Fermor made no comment on the change, though she spoke a few words apart to Iris. 'You will mind what you are about, Iris. There is neither to be mock-modesty nor barefaced flirtation. I think either of them in shockingly bad taste. I was sorry to receive a hint that you had been guilty of the one or the other last night. What! you do not understand me, Miss Compton? I give you credit for more brains. What do you call mock-modesty but an assumption of ignorance of a gentleman's intentions, which have been patent to anyone who chose to use his or her eyes for the last three months? If the ignorance had been real, it must have been idiotic. And what is your idea of a hoydenish flirtation but to turn your shoulder and run away from a man who has my leave to pursue you, and will stop you before many days are done? I could give you a good shaking for your pains.'

'Grandmamma, will you let me speak to you?' begged Iris, shaking already in every limb before the crisis, but nerving herself, like

a brave-hearted girl with a clear conscience, for the encounter.

‘No, I will not,’ answered Lady Fermor, with hardly restrained violence of absolute denial, so that the sound reached Lucy in the other window. ‘I have no time to listen to your flighty maundering nonsense; besides, there is nothing further to be said. I have already told you that you are not everybody’s bargain—that I am doing my best for you, while you are behaving like an ungrateful baby. Come, Miss Acton, I hear the carriage drawing up.’

Such was the seasoning which Iris had beforehand to the various courses of a Dresden china fête.

Lady Fermor’s party and Lady Thwaite’s party constituted the principal people at Sir William’s hay-making. The Hollises had been otherwise engaged, and the contribution from the Rectory, from Knotley, even from Birkett barracks, was of inferior importance. If Lady Fermor’s ball had become Miss Compton’s, Sir William Thwaite’s hay-making was more than half Lady Fermor’s. Though Lady Thwaite had engaged to give the guests tea in her old drawing-room, the mistress of

Lambford put in her oar again and unceremoniously robbed the former mistress of Whitehills of all save her bare perquisites, while Lady Thwaite was too much of a woman of the world to do more than shrug her shoulders imperceptibly and smile, and gracefully waive her superior claims.

Lady Fermor took the initiative. She knew, or held that she knew, exactly what to do. She had the programme cut and dry. She drove straight to the hay-field, where Sir William was restlessly awaiting his guests, while his reception of them there could be made a more informal and easy matter than it could have been managed in the house. The old lady at once occupied the arm-chair which she had directed to be brought out for her, and asked for a glass of wine to drink the hay-makers' healths and prosperity to the crop and its master, which she did in a spirited little speech composed for the occasion. Then she ordered all the select company to find rakes and toss the grass with the best, while she sat and presided over the work and boasted of the hay-making machine which had superseded hay-makers at Lambford. Thus the hay-field was as it were declared open to the better classes, and the fête

set a-going sheerly by the energy of Lady Fermor.

The scene was pleasant to see. The great hay-field consisted of acre upon acre of billowy meadow land just adjoining the park of Whitehills. The field commanded clumps of fine old trees and vistas of green. At the end of one vista stood the long, low, white manor-house, which had survived the vicissitudes of centuries, of kings, and of people, and had still been handed down from Thwaite to Thwaite, till it fell into the hands of a sergeant in a marching regiment.

Not infrequently the moist climate of East-wich had a mist—silver or golden, or dank-white—like a shroud, to hang its light, loose, wavy veil, or to wind its hazy, tight, straight folds about the landscape. To-day, after long dry, warm weather, there was no more of this mist than the softest amber haze of heat, which tempered the droughty blue of the sky even more than one or two fleecy white clouds flecking the expanse, and, making chequers of shade, afforded a sense of refreshment. The weather-wise pointed to these clouds, and coupling with them the well-known sign of the low darts here and there of the rooks, said Sir William

was drying his hay in time, for the fine weather would not last much longer.

The swathes of grass passing from green to russet filled the air with dusty sweetness, as they were whirled and swirled about, not with the precision and monotony of the hay-making machine, but with the more picturesque irregularity of human arms and human wills. Here and there a precocious cluster of haystacks showed where the early sun had shone most strongly and the early workers toiled most diligently.

The true workers, tanned and freckled, with an ancient green-stained smockfrock or two lingering in the ranks of jackets, and a snow-white, deep pink, or fresh lilac sun-bonnet asserting itself at different points among the brown straw-hats, were in keeping with the occupation. It was pursued with a sort of dogged industry and slow humorous pretence of the primitive hay-makers at not so much as seeing their esoteric fitful assistants.

Lady Fermor, in her chair, with her nodding plumes, and her stiff fingers covered with rings, looked the mediæval châtelaine to perfection. The artificial workers lent greater animation and gaiety to the heavier, more sombre groups

among which they mingled for a few hours. The ladies and gentlemen brought delicate play and airy flutter, like the accompaniment of fairy music to the deeper tones of the human choir. There were the lighter swish of soft dresses, and the daintier effect of wonderful shades of colour in primrose and daffodil, peacock-blue, cardinal-red, and sea-coral. There were graceful gambols, with badly poised new rakes and pitch-forks, freedom to rest every other moment, the continual refrain of merry jesting and laughter accompanying a labour of love and fancy, and not of strict necessity and a workaday use and wont.

Doubtless there were some gloomy and saturnine souls that resisted the intrusion of fairies among the battered warriors and amazons, the beaten victims of the sweat of the brow and the bondage to poverty and toil. Sir William himself was not without a tendency to look, from time to time, in this light at the party he had permitted, if not originated. But the apathetic, much-enduring Eastwich labouring men and women for the most part treated the liberty taken with their class in a more genial and wholesome, if more superficial spirit. The appearance of the gentlefolks in the field

formed a fine sight, their antics proved a famous diversion to their humbler neighbours, and for that matter the grandees had their troubles as well as their gay doings, and were but dust like the rest of the world, which was a comfortable reflection.

There was the squire, looking none so hearty and heedless that anybody need eat out his heart with envying him. Mayhap he wished himself back among his early friends, doing a day's work, trudging on the march, talking and smoking their clay pipes over their mugs of beer, when the sun went down. Mayhap working at being a gentleman, to which he had not been bred, turned out the hardest work of all. The women among the real hay-makers thought surely they would have a taste of cowslip wine—still extant in East-wich—or elderberry wine and diet cake to sweeten their mouths after the usual field fare, when the gentlefolks were holding their feast.

In the meantime Sir William, though he wore an expression of inflexible gravity, as one on the eve of a grand epoch in his life, was not a blot on his company. He showed best in his morning dress, in which he was most at

home—any rusticity or obliviousness of what another squire would have done without a thought, did not come into prominence, or merely peeped out with a species of propriety in the relaxation of the hay-making. The sort of fettered air which haunted him at other times, with a depressing effect, had largely disappeared on this occasion. In his tweed suit and straw hat he looked the comely, stalwart young fellow he was ; he moved about almost freely, almost lightly.

Iris's vexation and nervous oppression—when they were not at once confirmed by Sir William's conduct—did not remain proof against the fresh open-air attractiveness of the scene, with its touches of sentiment and fantasticalness. She had visions of Madame de Sévigné at Les Rochers ; and Madame Delany at some of the innumerable country houses of her innumerable friends, from the 'dear Duchess' downwards ; of Lady Sarah Lennox on the lawn before Holland House, when Kensington was a village and a king rode by ; of a picture which hung up yonder in the drawing-room at Whitehills. It represented a Lady Thwaite whom Sir Joshua had painted as a shepherdess, and neither her husband nor

anybody else had resented the masquerade, though the very next generation had punished, with life-long expulsion from the family, a son of the house who took a gamekeeper's daughter for his bride.

The light returned to Iris's eyes, and the colour to her cheek. Sir William had not so much as spoken to her, except in a general welcome to Lady Fermor's party. He did not come near her. Was a great deliverance granted to her? Had he got his lesson so that he would not affront her again by confounding common charity with full sympathy and warm regard? In that case her grandmother could do nothing, and he would soon forget his baulked expectations. She, Iris, did not think she could ever again slumber in such sweet security and lightness of heart, as she had allowed herself to feel, but at least she might be happy to-day in the sunshine in the meadow, among friendly young people, her contemporaries.

Iris and Lucy and Ludovic Acton, with Lady Thwaite's niece Janie, flung about the future hay for a quarter of an hour in an orderly professional manner. Then Lucy, backed with half-shy glee by Janie, turned

upon the naval lieutenant. They showered the contents of their rakes upon him till he was stuck all over, from the crown of his hat to the soles of his boots, with seeded grass. Iris looked on and laughed with maidenly coyness. Five or six years ago she would have been forward in the game, for which she still felt a secret inclination, but she was too grown up and decorous to engage in sisterly or schoolgirl romping. He did not mind it, though there were stray specimens of the seeds in his sandy beard and moustache for the next hour. His sister was constantly imploring him, in vain, to let her pick them out. He said they did not bother him, and would not at all interfere with his flute-playing. He had brought his second-best flute in his pocket, as he felt certain Lady Thwaite and Sir William must have made some provision for drawing-room music. For anything farther, the seeds ought to stay where they were, as a punishment to Lucy for her unsisterly behaviour. He did not mean any reflection on Miss Janie, who could do as she pleased, and was not to be considered accountable for his acquiring the look of having slept last night in a hayfield, like any tramp or vagabond. It

was a member of his own family, his sister Lucy, the prop of the Sunday-school, who had set herself to draw down on him the slanderous inference. It was too dreadful, almost more than could be borne with manly fortitude.

The wit was of the mildest description, but the girls laughed at it as if it had been Attic salt. They laughed, too, when Ludovic was the first to complain of an ache in his strong back, and to propose a saunter round the meadows, where the saunterers gathered all that was left of the queen of the meadow and ragged robin.

Iris suggested that they should sit down, when Mr. Acton might convert himself into a Corydon or an Orpheus, on the spot, by piping to them on his reed—toot-tootling on his flute she meant—if he had not broken it when he had disobeyed Lucy and everybody else, and got his boots in a mess of clay, in spite of the dry weather, by burrowing in the side of the ditch after a harmless hedgehog. But Lucy forbade him, insisting that the hay-makers would consider the piping an invitation to leave off working and take to dancing—not such dances as came naturally to Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses.

Among the *bond fide* workers was a woman, who raked and spread the grass slightly apart from her neighbours. She had come on Sir William's express invitation, but she was not well received by the other field-workers. They had little to say against her. It was nothing to them that old Abe Smith had a doubtful reputation as an under-keeper, and only retained his post till he should cross the seas to his son, by a cross whim of old Sir John's, which he seemed to have left as a legacy to the present baronet. It was even little to the lasses and wives and mothers that Honor was not like other young women. She was masculine and wild in her ways. Instead of staying in the cottage at Hawley Scrub and attending to her housewifery, as they stayed at home and scoured and washed and plied their needles when they were not at field-work, she lived in the woods, summer and winter, like her father. She was said to aid and abet him in his nefarious doings, if so be he had nefarious doings. She was not a relation of the common country people's, old Abe being come of a nearly extinct race of settlers, while Honor's mother had belonged to the quarry-folk who dwelt hard upon Mistley Downs, and were, next to

the ancient squatters, the most unsettled and unruly natives of the district. But the great offence was that Honor was not, and never had been, a field-worker; and the ordinary Eastwich field-worker looked as dubiously and disapprovingly on an interloper as any exclusive set, high or low, objects to an intruder into their charmed circle. The squire might bring as many ladies and gentlemen into the field as he liked, but a strange field-worker was another matter. That was not to be thought of. That was not Eastwich manners.

The solitary figure was conspicuous in the black gown, with the red handkerchief not worn round her throat, but drawn over her abundant brown hair and knotted under her chin, as her sole protection against the beating down rays of the afternoon sun. The head-gear lent an outlandish, half-gipsy air to Honor, to which she did not object. It certainly suited with her being held at arm's length by her fellow workers, neither did she appear to mind the ostracism. Perhaps she took it as a compliment, for hers was an odd character, with its own peculiar pride, as well as its dash of cynicism. She might put down

the distance at which she was kept to the fact that, as a keeper's daughter, if he had been a flourishing keeper of unblemished fame, she would have moved in a grade of life considerably higher than that of the day-labourers, her present companions. This reflection doubtless helped her philosophy, for she looked contented enough whenever she paused to contemplate the amount and the thoroughness of the work to which she was unused.

Sir William did not fail Honor Smith. Like Lady Fermor, he did not lose sight of a friend. He came down to her corner of the field several times and spoke with her, asking how her father was, when he proposed to take out their berths in the Liverpool ship, how she was getting on with her work, and how long she thought it would take for the grass to dry. But Sir William spoke also, though with greater effort, to other men and women in his pay with whom he had struck up an acquaintance. There was nothing at all striking in his notice of Honor Smith till Major Pollock strolled towards her, and began to talk to her in a way that interfered with her work and annoyed her, to judge by the manner in which she rested on her rake and flung back her head.

She had been a motherless girl from her first recollection ; and old Abe had not been the most efficient of guardians, so that she had early learnt to take care of herself. Nobody dared to say that, with all her faults, she had not been vigilant in defending her womanhood from unworthy aggression ; yet here she found herself obliged to stand still, and suffer what she was not slow to regard as the insolent advances of a gentleman who would take no repulse, whom she could not escape, neither could she dismiss him from her presence.

It was then Sir William crossed the field swiftly to Honor Smith's aid.

‘You know, Honor, I am looking for half the field being in haycock to-night.’ He addressed her as if she were his friend as well as his servant, while he ignored the unwelcome, compulsory guest brought upon him by Lady Fermor. ‘I count upon you doing your best. Look here, you must not permit any interference with your work.’

‘All right, Sir William,’ she said, very much as a free-spoken man would have answered him, while her white teeth flashed out in a broad smile against the warm brown of her cheeks and the red of her handkerchief ; ‘will

you be so good as to repeat your orders to this here gentleman ?'

In spite of her smile and her masculine tone, there was very much of the woman in the mingled impatience, anger, and disgust of the last sentence.

'Oh, I'm off! Excuse me. I had no idea I was guilty of an intrusion,' the Major mumbled superciliously and impertinently as he lounged away, giving more freedom to the expression of his thoughts the farther he got out of Sir William's hearing. 'So my gentleman has two strings to his bow, low hypocrite and temperance dog that he is! It would not be a bad idea to give the old beldame a hint.'

But Major Pollock did not feel equal to fulfilling his intention, though a fine opening presented itself to him the very next moment. Lady Fermor, who had been fully alive to the little episode, made an imperious signal for him to come to her side, and told him roundly:

'Pollock, if you cannot behave yourself at this time of the day, you shan't enter decent society under my auspices again.'

'What does she mean by decent society?' muttered her follower, as disloyal as he was abject. 'Her own, or that of the stuck-up

swashbuckler whom she means to call her grandson, or the red-capped woman who is Miss Compton's rival? A fine collection!

But though Major Pollock refrained from using his foul tongue when he was called to account, and was cowed by Lady Fermor's rough reprimands, he registered both the offence to his pride and the choice communication he desired to convey, for a future occasion.

Lady Fermor's seat was not far from a gate into the park where a side path led to the house. Sir William had done his best to make everything easy for his patroness. He gave her his arm and conducted her carefully to the gate, a movement which was a sign for the company to follow their leaders. Within the gate a sedan-chair, which had been used by the late Sir John, was drawn up. Sir William placed the old lady in it; then he took his stand by the open gate, and in a dumb show, which was not without its clumsy grace of honest hospitality, did not so much receive as show in his company. He was making himself their servant, according to his sense of a host's part. As Iris Compton came up he found voice to address her:

‘I hope you are enjoying yourself, Miss Compton?’

She had no choice except to answer :

‘Thanks ; I am enjoying myself very much, Sir William.’

She felt aggrieved as well as troubled by the hot flush of pleasure, the momentary broad smile, which her matter-of-course words brought into his face, and by the emphatic nod of acquiescence and approval volunteered by her grandmother.

Sir William would suffer no one but himself to wheel the chair along the by-path which turned into the main sweep and terminated at the entrance to the house.

The rest of the party, preceding the two, entered the fine hall which had failed to impress its owner on the March day when Mr. Miles brought the heir home, and passing the library, went into Lady Thwaite’s old drawing-room.

The former Lady of Whitehills was in her element as she again presided in the well-known domain, welcoming everybody, entertaining everybody, seeing that Mrs. Cray and Cumberbatch supplied the company with tea, or wine, or ices, as they preferred. Mrs. Cray

did not relish the deputy mistress. The house-keeper might stomach an 'own lady,' if Sir William chose to bring her on the scene, but not the late madam, who came to remark on changes, and call for this or that to which she had been accustomed, but which was not cleaned and put out for the occasion. But as for Cumberbatch, he was as much in his element as Lady Thwaite was in hers. He considered this was something like a return, on a small scale, to the dignified hospitality of the Dean.

Lady Thwaite was supported by the Rector, in a flush of benignity, divided between the advisability of lending his countenance to a lady who was in the position of hostess—a trying position under the circumstances—or of hurrying off to relieve Sir William of the charge of Mr. Acton's old prodigal, the most unmistakable and unmitigated prodigal in his flock.

Lady Thwaite had an elevating sense of magnanimity in doing her duty, under such altered conditions, in the Whitehills drawing-room; she had also a considerable feeling of enjoyment in displaying the magnanimity, knowing that almost everybody to whom she

sent a cup of tea and a shaving of bread-and-butter, or a pile of grapes, or a peach in lieu of the strawberries which had not waited for the second hay-cutting, was remembering to say, 'Poor dear Lady Thwaite, how unselfish and amiable she is, and how much Sir William and the rest of us are obliged to her, for she must feel all this dreadfully. She must be overpowered by a throng of old associations.'

Lady Thwaite was not overpowered in the line sketched out for her; but she had some pensive perceptions which gave her the agreeable conviction that there was no sham in her magnanimity. How well her old drawing-room looked, bare as it was! what a poor little place her drawing-room at Nether-ton would always be in comparison! Of course she could not carry off the carved cornice, the caryatides of the chimney-piece, the space, those odd available nooks with their charming air of retreat and delightful lights and shades. That relic of the musicians' gallery, the only one left in the county—she used to be so proud of it, and show it off to all strangers. In like manner she had exhibited the two Sir Joshuas. They were heir-looms, but she might have asked for the

fragment of old tapestry hanging over the railing of the gallery. She had been too modest, particularly as Sir William doubtless imagined it a bit of old carpet, and wondered what it was doing there.

Iris could not escape from certain new sensations when she entered Whitehills again. She had the taste to value it, and she could not avoid reminding herself that if Lady Fermor and Lady Thwaite were right, as her awakened instincts told her they were, all might be hers. This might become her stately, beautiful home—her home, with a man on whom its mellowed dignity, refinement, and comfort would be thrown away, who might like to pull down the old pile, and replace it by a hideous staring modern mansion, which had not borrowed one idea from Ruskin or Morris, Kensington or Turnham Green. If Sir William did not meditate such wholesale desecration, he was probably only waiting for his marriage to re-furnish Whitehills, 'right off,' like a new pin, as she had once heard him express himself, with waggon-loads of gorgeous chairs and couches, and curtains brought down from Shoolbred's or Maple's, and only the modern antiques re-

jected along with the veritable antiques. Certainly taste was not everything, was not very much in a man's moral and spiritual composition ; still, it stood for a good deal in the girl's mind—for that culture which, however laughed at in its extravagance, still marks the difference between knowledge and ignorance, polish and roughness, and represents to a gentlewoman easy sympathy, natural companionship, familiar interests, and almost involuntary respect and regard. She was right in what she had said last night. Whitehills, even though it had been Warwick Castle or Windsor, was not worth a girl's selling herself that she might be its temporary owner, and dwell there in loveless state and bounty, in heavy dulness and loneliness, in constant petty affront and perturbation, for what its untutored, sometimes uncouth master might or might not say and do.

It was better for him, if he had been presumptuous—she held to her point, he had mistaken her manner unwarrantably—that she should see all the incongruity and folly of the proposal, therefore it did not choke her to eat his bread at second-hand from Lady Thwaite. Iris felt calm again. She could go

and look at the Sir Joshuas with Lucy, and speculate whether the Lady Thwaite of a hundred years ago had ever tried making hay, or had been at the pains to look at the process, save in some French print of '*Un Amusement Pastorale*,' though she had been an Eastwich bride and had dwelt at Whitehills for the most of her life. If it had been otherwise, could she have dressed herself in what looked like a pink gauze sacque, and worn a mob-cap with a hat suspended by the ribbons half way down her shoulders, and employed such a toy rake as would not have gathered more than half-a-dozen blades of grass at a time?

King Lud had his will. There was a little music extracted with difficulty from the old piano, for Lady Thwaite had carried away her Broadwood, and this was an instrument 'as old as the hills,' the most musical man present felt bound to protest with a groan, an out-of-tune thing without the additional octaves, which had been used by Sir John's last unmarried sister. Lady Thwaite played first, but Iris, though she played among the other girls, declined to follow immediately after her hostess.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEAST THROWS HIMSELF AT BEAUTY'S FEET.

IRIS was getting too bold, far too bold; she took herself to task disconsolately soon afterwards, when all her nerves were jarred, and her heart again sent fluttering in her throat. There had been some talk of the garden, and Lady Thwaite had asked Sir William about the lilies which ought to be in blossom on the pond, and about the Japanese lilies which she had introduced with success into the tank at the end of the largest greenhouse. There was a little stir indicative of an adjournment to the gardens, but Iris felt quite safe in joining in the movement. It would only be the young people who would go out again before returning home to dinner, and mentally she classed Sir William, in spite of his last night's waltzing, with the elderly folks, and seated him in her imagination beside

Lady Fermor, to whom he seemed bent on doing the honours of his house. Iris was ready to acknowledge, even in her present prejudiced state of mind, that the homage did not come ill from the prime of manhood to tottering, though untamed and undaunted old age. Instead, her dream of security was rudely broken by her seeing Sir William standing in front of her, and hearing him say, 'Miss Compton, would you mind going to see the lilies?'

She did mind, but she could not say so. She had an instantaneous comprehension that the hour and the man had come, and she must meet them with the courage which other girls summoned up for similar trials. She took his arm and walked out, with the knowledge that all the eyes in the room were fixed on the couple, as they had been last night. She dared not let herself think that Lucy must be pitying her, lest the sense of her friend's compassion should shake her firmness.

Slight and matter-of-course as the advance might appear, it was really the most direct, unmistakable approach he had made to her that day. She would never have looked upon it as anything save a host's politeness, and Sir

William's growing *savoir faire*, if it had not been for what she had been told last night, which had robbed her of her ease and peace of mind, till she could not put an indifferent interpretation on a simple action.

Iris could not tell whether Sir William had been spurred on by her grandmother to take the leap which lay before him, or whether it was the spontaneous impulse of a man with regard to whom she had not doubted that he was a brave man. He might never have read poetry (if she had known it, he had taken to reading it lately, and had gone through dozens of love poems on her account), still, he might by instinct have arrived at an entire agreement with the gallant Montrose :

'He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all.'

Yet she felt the arm on which her fingers were resting trembling as she walked along the corridor, and she feared she would need to have coolness for both. She had read that in certain circumstances, under the influence of passion, strong men are sometimes weaker than fragile women. But whatever other girls had done

she ought to be able to do, and surely he would take his rejection like a man. She knew he could not conceal his feelings, and she did not expect him to be forbearing and generous, especially after what her grandmother had done. He might be rude and angry, but his anger was not what she feared.

Withal, modest as Iris was, she never doubted the sincerity of Sir William's sentiments, she never fancied that he could be influenced by any other motive than unfortunate misplaced attachment to herself. There was little distrust, and almost no suspicion, in Iris Compton's nature, neither was there the least tendency to double-dealing or trifling. There was not the making of a coquette in her. Now that the moment from which she had turned away with the greatest repugnance was at hand, she would rather face it and have it over, because it would be better for both of them. Then she would reckon with her grandmother ; at least the gentle, inexperienced, ill-armed girl would match herself with the woman who had eaten of the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of evil to the last bitter-sweet morsel, who could be as furious as she was unscrupulous.

Iris only made a single attempt to direct the course of events a little in her favour, and in his favour also. Everybody seemed bound for the gardens; had she and he not better have it out where there were fewer spectators? at least spectators less interested in watching the couple from a distance, and greedily scanning each sign of the result of the interview. If the poor man were in danger of making a spectacle of himself, ought she not to screen him as far as she could from exposure?

‘If it is all the same to you, Sir William,’ said Iris, with an involuntary tremor in her voice, ‘I should prefer to go down to the hay-field again. I should like to speak to an old acquaintance there.’

‘Whatever you please,’ he told her hurriedly. ‘We may come back by the lilies. They are like—they make me think of you—I mean of how you looked last night.’

She had nothing to answer. She was afraid he might go on to reproach her with slighting him at her ball. Yet how could he have felt the slight if he cared to remember her looks last night? She was afraid everything remained to be told. She began to talk fast on another subject in order to excuse herself for

neglecting the lilies. She was nerving herself to give him a hearing and an answer once for all. But she did not see that she need keep silent, and bring on a premature declaration—that she might not rather stave it off as long as possible. It was inconsistent, but it was the struggle between her girlish courage and girlish cowardice.

‘I wish to go down and see Honor Smith,’ she said, in what sounded to him as the most extraordinary coincidence. ‘I used to know her long ago.’

She succeeded in arresting for a moment the words which were trembling on his lips, and arousing his curiosity instead.

‘Do you know Honor Smith?’ he inquired in surprise. ‘She did me a bit of a service not long since; that is how I came to know her. How did it come about that you and she were acquainted?’

‘Simply enough. I was living alone with my governess, at Lambford. Grandmamma and grandpapa used to go a good deal about in those days, and I was always left at home with Miss Burrage. She was a good, kind woman, who tried to make me care for others, and she began with little girls like myself.

The Rector told us of a child a few years older than I was, who had fallen down a bank and broken her arm. She had no mother or female relative; she was lying alone, only taken care of by her father and brother, when they were at home, over at the cottage at Hawley Scrub. Miss Burrage took me there several times, and we did what we could for poor Honor. When she was well again she used to bring me presents of wild-flowers, blackberries, and nuts, and birds' eggs, for years afterwards, till grandmamma put a stop to it. She says, people did not run in and out of cottages and have such acquaintances when she was young. I am afraid she had heard something to the disadvantage of Honor and her family.'

'Just so,' said Sir William, with his impenetrable manner. 'But you have no horror of poor common people and their ways?'

'Horror!' exclaimed Iris, a little taken aback, 'I should hope not. Neither is grandmamma horrified, but she thinks the social lines between the classes should be strictly drawn. They were so long ago,' she ended a little nervously, with a consideration for his origin.

‘Then why did she open her doors to me?’ he startled her by asking a little sarcastically. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he added immediately with a softened manner. ‘What although it was because I had come into my own, and was master of Whitehills here, since I do not believe you would have made the same distinction—I do not mean that I do not know what was fitting for the likes of you—but at least you could keep company with Honor Smith and not forget what was due either to her or to yourself. You two were friends. It is what I should have expected from you.’

She was saved from the necessity of saying anything further. The two had been walking fast, and Honor had made such progress with her work that she was turning over and spreading the swathes of grass close to the park wall, while the rest of the haymakers were several paces behind.

‘I have brought a young lady to see you, Honor,’ he said with an eager pride which hurt Iris. ‘She says that she does not want an introduction, for you and she were thick together when you were children.’

‘Miss Compton is very kind,’ said Honor, with some pleasure in her face and voice. At

the same time she looked sharply at the two, and she stepped back, idly moving the hay with her foot, instead of drawing nearer. 'It is a power of years since we were acquainted,' she added with growing reserve, 'and I have not had any other friend of the kind, so that we have fallen out of knowledge like, and it don't seem worth while to rake up the past and begin to build upon it.'

'Nonsense !' said Sir William bluntly.

'I am not surprised that you should think so, Honor,' said Iris, a little pained nevertheless, 'but I could not help our old friendship being stopped ; it was always pleasant to me. After Miss Burrage left—you remember Miss Burrage, and how she could put your bandages right, and knew exactly what you would like to eat and drink?—I was as lonely a girl as you were, perhaps lonelier, for I had neither father nor brother. You may see and believe I have not forgotten you.'

'Oh, don't go for to heed what I say, miss !' burst out Honor, with shame and contrition. 'I have run clean wild, as the other women among the workers will tell you. I am as bad as the women who 'list in disguise, or get into the Queen's ships in Jack Tar's clothes, and

are only found out when they are dead or dying. It would be a jolly lark, and I think I could die game. But I am speaking to a delicate young lady as was good to me when I were sick and little, and I might speak what would suit her ears better. I am glad to have seen and spoken with you again, Miss Compton; and I wish you all the happiness you deserve,' she said a little formally, and glanced doubtfully at Sir William.

'Faith, you're in a queer humour, Honor,' said Sir William discontentedly. 'I never heard that you set up for a rowdy or a gipsy.'

'You don't know me yet, Sir William,' answered Honor curtly.

'Is it true, Honor, that you and your father are going to cross the sea?' inquired Iris. 'If so, will you let me wish you all the freedom you like and all the prosperity you can meet with out there? Some day we may hear of you as successful settlers who have not feared privations, and who have held the last of the Red Indians at bay.'

Honor looked up with a brighter face. 'Yes, you may. That's a good wish; them are kind words.' Then a shade of sullenness fell

again across her face, and she bent her head over her work and began anew to exert her entire energies in drawing together and shaking out the hay, as if she would put an end to the conversation. 'It is the best that can happen to me since I've missed what the likes of you might have made of me,' she said again with bitterness.

Iris attempted no rejoinder, no fresh reminder that she had been without power to act otherwise than she had done. She stood silent for a moment, at last she turned back with Sir William strolling by her side. 'I never thought Honor Smith would grow into a woman like this,' Iris said regretfully. 'She was such a bright, warm-hearted girl.'

'You see,' he said awkwardly in his agitation, 'she missed her great good; and how am I ever to ask it for myself—that you will take me and make me something better than I am—better than anything I have ever thought of?'

'Don't speak so, Sir William,' she begged him low, but with the utmost earnestness of entreaty. 'Indeed, I wish you and every human being well, but you are asking what I cannot give. No human being is able to

aid another in the way you seem to think. It is not allowed to humanity; it is a far higher prerogative. You can be a good man—the best of men if you will, with God helping you. You do not need to ask a girl like me, or the mightiest power on earth, to help you.'

'But you may do what you can to help me,' he urged. 'You may make me a happy or miserable man, Miss Compton. Do you know the difference between the two? You may make this place a blessing or a curse to me, and perhaps to more than me. I know, none better, how terribly far I am from you—what a tremendous favour I am asking; but if you could bring yourself to grant it, there is nothing I can imagine that I would not do to please you—to make you as happy as a queen. My sister—I had a sister once who did not think so badly of me—said she believed I could make any woman happy if I tried. That was rank folly, and because she was rare fond of me, for I was her lad, whom she had mothered for many a year. But, Miss Compton, there's nothing I would not try.'

'Oh, don't say that again,' besought Iris in

her pain. 'I believe you, but I never thought it had gone so far as this. If I had only known—if I could have done anything to prevent it!'

'Did you not know? Could you not guess?' he asked wistfully, with a little resentment stealing into his tones. 'I dare say I could not put it to you—could not make you understand as a man like yourself could have done; and I was a coward when I feared to scare or offend you. Your grandmother knew almost from the first. She gave me encouragement; she said plainly I had her consent, or I might not have presumed.'

'Don't talk of presumption,' she protested. 'Only think how you are wasting your regard! Call up your pride, and don't waste your—your liking for me any longer. You have a right—every man has a right to ask a return for what he gives, or to take it back without letting it lie unacknowledged and unaccepted—I don't say spurned—no girl with a heart in her breast would spurn such an offering, unless it were forced upon her.'

'In time she might stoop and pick it up,' he said quickly.

'Oh no, not if there were such an unlikeness

and such unsuitability as exist here. She would have been very sorry that such an idea had ever entered into a man's head, but she would be firm when truth and happiness were at stake.'

'Truth !' he repeated passionately. 'I love you true as the heavens above us. Happiness ! I should be the happiest man the world ever saw, if you but said, "Will Thwaite, next year, or five or ten years hence, I will give a thought to what you said after the Whitehills hay-making—if you go on improving yourself nearer to a gentleman, you shall have your reward before you leave this world."'

'But that is not the truth, and the happiness you imagine would be a short-lived delusion,' she persisted in words that she knew must cut deep, but so the operator has to use the knife if he will save the victim ; and she was doing what she had to do with keen suffering to herself. 'It is not only that we have been brought up quite differently, with other customs and standards, but that we have so little in common which makes your notion that we could become close companions and fast friends, and be happy together,

incredible in its absurdity. Forgive me for saying so, but you will soon see it yourself; you will be conscious before long that you have only been carried away by a passing fancy for the first girl you saw after you came to Whitehills, who spoke as she felt, out of simple goodwill. You will thank me; yes, I believe you will live to thank me for saving, not only myself, but you, from a great blunder and a lifelong disaster.'

Is there anything to equal the fearless confidence even of the wisest, most modest young girl when she thinks the path of duty lies plain before her, and that she has to follow it at whatever cost? The only parallel is the innocent, uncomprehending sincerity which may crush with the weight of lead the object on which it falls.

Sir William's ruddy colour faded, and he writhed under the blow inflicted by the usually kind, gentle hand; but he had still a man's spirit left in him to resent and deny his share of her inferences. 'You are wrong, Miss Compton. I mean you are altogether and hugely wrong where I have to do with what you say. I may be—since you will have it I am—a poor lout of a fellow, but I know this,

that my love for you is not a light fancy, and that I shall never thank you for parting us, if so be you do part us—never, though I were to live a hundred lives !’

She sighed an impatient sigh. He had succeeded in stirring up in her that sense of personal affront with which she had first heard of his suit. She began again to feel indignant on her own account, as well as deeply hurt for him. She spoke, as it sounded to him, more mercilessly and cruelly than before, though she judged it a just and humane cruelty.

‘And I cannot, now or ever, care for you as you wish, as you are entitled to ask of any girl, if you are justified in addressing her at all, as you have addressed me. I must say,’ continued Iris with a swelling heart, and her little head held higher than was its wont, ‘that I don’t think you are justified in—in making love or proposing to me by anything that I have ever said or done. You are not entitled to draw down such a trial on me, whoever may be in fault. But it has all been a wretched mistake, and it is better to forget it at once, and for ever, than to seek to apportion the share of blame to everybody concerned,’ she hurried on. ‘Sir William, you

spoke of my stooping to pick up your regard—it is you who are stooping and degrading yourself, if you say another word to me on the subject, after what I have said to you—with real sorrow and shame, because I would not hurt anyone if I could help it, because I believe you have been misled and have deceived yourself.’

They were standing just within the gate in the path which led to the house. He turned round with a face in a flame again, and hands which were clenched in desperation. He could not restrain himself, as a man differently constituted and differently trained might have done.

‘Do you mean,’ he said slowly, ‘that nothing I can do will make any difference, that you will never look on me as a lover or a husband? That not only I don’t take your fancy now, but that you will let some other man take it and welcome, and hold yourself free from any wrong done to me? But that is not all, you think I have wronged you by telling you, with my lady’s permission, that I love you as I love my life; that I have loved you from the first moment I ever saw you. You will hold me a mean rascal, a low dog, if I demean myself

further to cringe and beseech you for what you have said I can never get.'

'Yes,' said Iris faintly. 'That is in some sort my meaning.'

'Then don't be frightened, Miss Compton. I won't demean myself: you have heard the last of the story. You have done with me, and I hope you may never repent having stripped life of all it held sweet, even to your greatest inferior, a beggar who began life in the gutter and was the blackguard of the barrack-yard. I hope you'll never be sorry—if women have any pity in their breasts—for sending him back to where he came from, with ten devils, instead of one, to bear him company.'

He was breaking from her abruptly, when the most inappropriate interruption stopped him.

Refreshments had been sent out to the hay-makers—an ample and choice store of meat and drink—by the orders of a man with a full heart, who had been so besotted as to let himself be duped into thinking that the day was to bring him blessedness, either in sure prospect or in fulfilment. The company who were about to enjoy their feast had seen

the squire in the hay-field again with a young lady, and afterwards standing in conversation with her just inside the park gate. The best mannered were struck with the opportunity of thanking him, and, according to immemorial precedent, drinking his health. But they were too bashful to intrude on him and his companion in a body. They deputed the oldest apple-cheeked man in the greenest-stained smock-frock to cross the field with his body bent and his knotted hands clasping a mug of ale, as if it contained the *elixir vitæ*. He was to act as proxy for the others, and express their general gratitude and satisfaction.

‘An’ it please you, Squire,’ he suddenly wheezed, turning up on the other side of the gate, and relieving the tension of his mind by leaning on it, and resting his mug on the top bar, ‘I have come to say that we’re greatly obligated for the wittles, and we’re a-drinking of your very good health.’ He paused a minute, and then gave voice to a happy original thought, which had slowly dawned on his mind as he was crossing the field, ‘And we’ll add the young lady’s very

good health, and long life and happiness to you both.'

At this ill-timed union of healths, with the inference conveyed, poor Sir William's last shred of endurance and composure gave way.

'Get off with you and your tomfoolery!' he cried, dealing the gate such a rough push that he sent the old deputy staggering a few paces. He still clasped the mug, though its contents had been dashed in his face and spilt all over the ground, leaving him ruefully staring, so far as his wet eye-lashes would let him, at the empty bottom of the vessel.

Iris shrunk back, shocked at the unseemly outbreak. The next moment she flung open the gate, went out, begged the old man's pardon, and pressed upon him her slight arm to lean upon, till he had recovered his footing. Then he pulled out his cotton handkerchief and mopped his face, and shaking his head, began, in spite of the repulse he had sustained and the disconsolateness which followed, to make rapid way on his return to his discomfited companions.

Sir William had started off in another direction. There was no more thought of showing her the lilies which she had re-

sembled, with their white cups rocking tranquilly on their green leaves. Some of her fellow-visitors were appearing at the end of the side path. Discomposed as she was, she saw that her best plan was to join them and pass in with them unperceived, if possible, to the drawing-room where Lady Fermor was waiting for her, and where Iris might say good-bye to Lady Thwaite before the party left. So many petty yet useful obligations, belonging to a long code of social rules, held Iris bound to self-restraint and courtesy. But poor Sir William, like a half savage, did not see why, when a tempest of misery had swept over him, when what of rank and social importance he possessed had become a second time utterly embittered to him, he should grin and bear it. He was furious with the sense of being befooled. He was stung to the quick by Iris Compton's absolute, wrathful rejection of him. Why should he go back and bow before a pack of fine people who did not care a straw for Will Thwaite? They would, if they knew all, turn their straight backs upon him in righteous indignation, and shun, as they would flee the plague, the most distant association with a drunken brute who

had lain under the sentence of the lash. They only noticed him and came to his house in their ignorance, because he was the master of Whitehills, and bore the title of Sir William, and was willing to treat his betters according to their idle fancies.

Long after Iris had accomplished successfully her unnoticed return to the drawing-room, so that even Lady Fermor did not observe where her grand-daughter sat among a group near one of the doors, there was a murmur, rising as loud as politeness would permit, for Sir William. Where had he gone? Was anybody responsible for his absence? Why did he desert his post and his guests? Here was a hitch in the simple ceremonies; here was a hole in this gentleman's coat which he did not button round him so tightly that the coarse jacket of the free-and-easy working man failed to peep through. Must the company go without taking leave of their host—without starting with his last greetings ringing in their ears?

Lady Fermor was craning her neck and defying a draught in order to look out and find what had become of Sir William and Iris. For a wonder the old lady said nothing.

All at once she discovered him in the hay-field, and detected Iris at the farther end of the room. Still she said nothing, but she squared the fleshless jaw of which age had revealed the massive bony outline—the most conspicuous feature, except the eyes, in the face which had otherwise shrunk and withered into a mummy-like representation of its former buxom self. That squaring of the heavy jaw, with a bending of the furrowed white brows set on Lady Fermor's face the seal—not of a frown, but of a scowl which few people cared to encounter. She continued to screw her eyes and her glass on the hay-field. The hay-makers had eaten through their meal not the less resolutely, though a little less jovially, because of the rough reception their messenger had met with. But one appetite had failed, and that belonged to Honor Smith. She played with her food and showed herself perplexed, if not put out.

At the end of the meal, the feasters began to show that it was time for them to betray a lurking, lingering resentment of the Squire's behaviour. They had polished the bones of a jolly good supper, roast and boiled, whole sides of bacon, pancakes and apple dumplings,

with plenty of ale to wash them down. They had nothing to complain of on that score. Everything had been as handsome as at a harvest thanksgiving, or a Christmas dinner, with no call to go to church if not inclined, or to listen to the parson preaching at them out of his pulpit. All the same, they did not like their best thanks and good healths to be trampled upon—leastways, knocked to the ground. If Martin Weeks had not been in his working clothes, his best coat and waist-coat would have been next to ruined. Ale-stains were not so easily rubbed out. Some squires they knew brought to mind the old saw about beggars and porters. Tottle ways were not the ways for a squire. Sukey Vass knew a man as were a tottler, and the water went to the brain and killed him, same as he had been a babby.

‘You are a graceless, wooden-headed crew!’ cried Honor Smith, starting to her feet and speaking loudly and shrilly, among the half-servile growling and muttering, ‘to eat a man’s bread and wag your tongues against him with the morsel still between your teeth or half-way down your throats! Can’t you tell for yourselves summat has taken a rise

out of the Squire since the afternoon? He ain't hisself. Do none of you never fly into a rage, and fling about the chairs and tables, when you dunno whether your head or your heels is uppermost?

'A man with a second crop of hay like this here, which he has gotten the whole field in cocks, and the clouds still holding up, has little call to go into a rage,' pronounced a ruined farmer in a tone of oracular condemnation.

How Honor's interference might have been taken, and whether she might not have provoked disagreeable reprisals, remained unproven, for the Squire himself was descried walking towards his hay-makers. He did look, in spite of his good clothes and his soldierly air, disordered and not himself, as Honor had said.

'Good-night,' he said to the people gruffly. 'You have had a long day's work, and the hay is safe. I ought to thank you as well as pay you. Will that make amends for anything I've said or done amiss? Look here; surely you need not mind what a fellow from the ranks without manners, like yourselves, says or does against the grain. Have you

grown so nice as to weigh words and looks like the high and mighty folk up yonder? indicating the house with a jerk of his elbow.

He did not wait for an answer. He drew Honor Smith aside, and said something which caused her to stare and redden, though she was not given to blushing. His words were, 'I'll be rid of the plaguy lot presently, Honor; and, remember, I'm coming over to you for comfort. I'm as dead beat as the hardest worker among you—as I ever was in India. Make haste home, or I'll reach Hawley Scrub before you. I've something to say to you and your father that may stop your voyage across the seas.'

Lady Fermor was looking through the trees at the hay-field, at the dispersing hay-makers, and at a couple standing for a moment apart from the others. Her familiar spirit, Major Pollock, was at her elbow. He looked the incarnation of malice as he showed his teeth in a grinning snarl. Generally his mistress kept him well in hand, but he could not resist so fine a chance of retaliation: 'Strapping gipsy, in black and red—eh! my lady? Curious how the most refined tastes will wander in by-ways and hanker after forbidden fruit.

But when it is a case of "like draws to like," I should say the game is up. What will you wager that the future mistress of Whitehills is not standing yonder? Exceedingly romantic, though low all round. A misfortune for the county—a shocking scandal, but not so very surprising, after all, if you measure the merits and antecedents of the master of the place. Looks like it, from this abominable forsaking of his company, and flaunting the rival attraction in our very faces.'

'Pollock, I should never speak to you again,' the enraged old lady turned on him, 'if it were not to show you what a fool you are, and what an idiotic error your slanderous tongue is leading you into. That girl pulled Sir William Thwaite out of a pond at the risk of her own life. He told me so himself. Man, are you worse than a beast, that you cannot understand common gratitude?'

'Common gratitude is sometimes an uncommonly deceitful and dangerous commodity, particularly when it leads a man and woman in different grades of life, nowadays at least, to strike up a friendship. But, of course, I stand corrected before your ladyship's superior information.'

Major Pollock bowed with mockery in his bow, but still with an appearance of submission:

Carriages and horses were being driven and led backwards and forwards along the sweep before Sir William came into the drawing-room again. He made no apology for his protracted absence, but said, in what sounded like a general leave-taking, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed yourselves.' There was a change in his tone, which a subtle student of human nature might have detected and puzzled over. The earnest desire to play his part well, the anxiety to please in certain quarters, which had weighed upon him, had disappeared. He moved more freely—almost with a defiant swagger, while he spoke rather in grim banter than in cheerful hope.

'Thwaite, what have you been making of yourself?' cried Lady Fermor peevishly, as if she had a right to call him to order, and to claim a compensation.

But he did not accord to her the slight atonement he had made to his working-people.

'Nothing,' he answered laconically, 'except that I found some one to keep me outside.'

He took her down in silence to her carriage and put her in, allowing Ludovic Acton to hand in Iris and Lucy. 'Good-bye, Lady Fermor,' said the host, standing orthodoxly enough bareheaded on the doorsteps, but going on to speak with an odd emphasis words which the occasion hardly seemed to require; 'I am indebted to you for all you have done for me. Good-bye, Miss Compton.' He forgot to speak to Lucy.

'Mercy on us, man! you are not taking farewell of us for ever,' Lady Fermor was moved to ejaculate; 'we shall see you to-morrow, if you do not walk over, in the course of the evening, to inquire whether my old bones are no worse of your hay-field and of the late hours last night.'

'Excuse me, my lady, I am bespoken elsewhere,' he said; but his words were drowned in the roll of the wheels.

Lady Fermor sat on the same side as Iris.

'Something is up,' the old woman mumbled in her grand-daughter's ear; 'and I shall hear what you have to say on the subject, Miss Compton, the moment we get home.'

Iris had no other thought than to tell her grandmother what had passed; severe as the

ordeal was, she would go through with it. Indeed, she was not sure that it could be quite so bad as what she had undergone already that day. She had her share of the courage and steadfastness which make martyrs; but she could not speak before Lucy, though she sympathized with all her might in what she guessed of the circumstances. Lucy would even have annihilated herself, or jumped out and walked home under the last hazily hot beams which the sun, low in the sky, sent out over the pastures and ponds of Eastham.

Iris sat and tried to be brave for what lay before her, while her mind went back with painful pertinacity, and rehearsed word for word the scene in which she had figured. How unreasonable he had been! How presumptuous! Yes, she must say it again—how violent! But there was one thing: he had never once mentioned Whitehills as an inducement for her to change her mind. Lady Thwaite had brought his place and position prominently forward, and, no doubt, Lady Fermor would dwell upon them, but he had not done it. He had ranted egotistically about his misplaced passion, but he had not shown a trace of mercenariness; in this re-

spect he had displayed the spirit of a gentleman.

Iris thought this with a little softening in her wholesale condemnation—even as she was making up her mind that she had seen the last of Whitehills for a long time—at least not till Sir William had found another girl whom he would be more justified in addressing, who did not mind his ignorance or rusticity, or who balanced against them the fine old manor-house, the noble trees in the park there, the position in county society, with, perhaps, the additional bribe of seasons in town, opera-boxes, and routs *ad infinitum*.

Iris did not wait for Lady Fermor to bid the girl follow her grandmother to her dressing-room, where Iris had gone as a little child to receive her deserts whenever she was in disgrace, and though the disgrace had always been sore to the child, she had not shirked the punishment. Her prompt anticipation of Lady Fermor's commands on this occasion had some effect in calming down her judge.

Lady Fermor threw herself into an arm-chair, untied her bonnet-strings, and asked, with more self-restraint than might have been expected :

‘What is the meaning of all this, Iris? What have you been about?’

‘Sir William Thwaite asked me to marry him, grandmamma, when we went out together, and of course I had to refuse him,’ said Iris with dry lips, but without hesitation, without sobbing breath or welling tears.

The information, together with the manner in which it was conveyed, struck Lady Fermor dumb. For an instant she sat glaring rather than staring at Iris, and tapping the arm of her chair. Lady Fermor could storm against weakness—she could meet violence with violence; but simple firmness which, as she knew by experience, might prove inflexibility, tried her to the utmost and well-nigh got the better of her. She was not a fool, though she was an arrogant tyrant, shameless where her evil-doing was concerned, and vain of her power.

‘Then all I have to tell you,’ she said at last, speaking nearly as quietly as Iris had spoken, ‘is that you are even sillier and more stupid and full of conceit than girls in general. I have done the best I could, and found an excellent match for you. There is not a mother far or near that would not be pleased

to establish her daughter at Whitehills ; and Sir William is a good, honest young fellow, who might make any right-minded, reasonable creature happy.'

'But, grandmamma——' interposed Iris in vain.

'Girl,' the old woman put her down, 'if you knew the world, you would understand what he is worth. He is fond of you, which is a deal more than you deserve ; but there is no accounting for men's tastes. I have tried to do better for you than I was able to do for your mother, and you have done what you could to thwart me. Do you not believe me, that you are not every man's bargain ? Few good sort of men, as you described Thwaite the first time you saw him, would care to seek you, because you are come of people who were no more safe than they were smug.'

'I don't wish to marry !' stammered Iris.

'Hold your tongue !' cried Lady Fermor. 'You will suffer for your folly, and you need not look to me for assistance. You are entirely dependent on me and your grandfather ; your precious father managed to run through his means, and did not leave you a penny. We have cared for you nearly all your life,

and I must say you are rewarding us well. You have been ungrateful and disobedient, and you have disappointed me thoroughly, though I can't say I ever had much hope of you. I don't pin my faith to cant and goody-goodness, which you were so quick to learn from that fanatic Burrage. But I have not done with you yet, Miss Compton, only Tom Mildmay and his wife are waiting for dinner, and I must go down and keep them in countenance. Girl, if it had only been to snap my fingers in their faces, and take my place in the county before them, for all their puritanical ways and their poking tricks, since Whitehills is a better property to begin with, and is unencumbered, while Lambford is pretty considerably dipped, you might have consented to please me and make a good fellow happy ; but you don't deserve the luck you have thrown away, and he is worth a dozen of you.'

Iris knew it would only increase her offence to attempt to answer Lady Fermor further—to beg her forbearance and forgiveness, to say how sorry she, Iris, was, for having displeased and disappointed her grandmother, in her autocratic disposal of her grand-daughter for

life—instead of going and getting ready for dinner without an instant's delay. After the day's tribulations, she was still fain—even without Lucy's encouraging assurances—to cling to the impression that she had got off more easily than she could have dared to look for, that Lady Fermor would be better than her word, and would have done with her grand-daughter from that night, so far as Sir William Thwaite's egregious blunder was concerned.

Iris could not fathom Lady Fermor's domineering determination of purpose, and indomitable strength of will, when she had an object to gain. The girl could not guess how little her grandmother cared for one girlish refusal, or a dozen girlish refusals, if she could pat the gentleman on the back and coax him to come on again, and yet again, until, by mingled wearing insistence and harsh persecution, she might sap the foundations of conscience and inclination, and force the rebel to yield.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘ONE WAS FAR AWAY, AND ONE WAS NEAR.’

THE sunset yet made red bars above the full green of Hawley Scrub, when Sir William kept his appointment with Honor Smith.

Abe was from home, only Honor had sat up for a little time by the dilapidated and dirty lattice window. The fire was out in the hot weather, and the father and daughter would have to content themselves with a cold supper.

The absence of any glow from the hearth served to increase the cheerlessness of the neglected house-place. But the coo of the cushet-dove came in from the scrub, and some woodruffe which Honor was drying—not without a likelihood of its being left to rot on the window-sill, filled the place with an odour which, in its sweet fragrance, has always a scent of decay. It seems to belong more to old memories, dead hopes, and graves with the

paths to them no longer trodden by lingering feet, than to the living fragrance of budding desires and happy expectations.

Honor was weary with a day's work as foreign to her as if she had been a lady, though she was strong with the strength of a fine physique and an open-air life. She was a picturesque but not a home-like figure, as she sat there in the gathering dusk with her brown fingers interlaced and her head, still covered by the red handkerchief which had shaded it from the sun, thrown back against the window-frame, catching the last rays of light. She was in a quandary, as she would have said.

'Whatever does he want here?' she asked herself, bewildered; 'he is not the man to come on a hang-dog errand, and I am not the woman to whom he would come in that case. Whatever else I've been, I've been true to poor Hughie. How long it seems since I seed him last, lying a-dying in quad at Birkett! I'm afraid I'm forgetting the very lines of his comely young face. But no man as knows me would liken me to a light lass, any more than he would liken the most delicate lady in the land. What is there between him and

Miss Compton? What can there be save his lands and the "Sir" before his name? and she ain't the one to sell herself, not if I know her. If anyone said I done it, I would be rare mad. Father said Squire were a kind of gentleman in his way—all the same, Sir William was reared a working man, and it do come out in him and pulls him down to his natural level. Some rises above it, sure and certain, like Uncle Sam; but then they raise themselves by their own struggles, and by slow degrees, learning as they go, and ain't tossed up as with a pitchfork and left to come to grief, like a larch-tree in a hothouse, or a living hare in a house-place, or a swallow in a cage.'

Sir William walked past the window as she spoke, and entered by the open door without the ceremony of knocking. His first actions were to toss his hat on the table, and to pull off his coat and fling it over the back of a chair. His first words were:

'There, I'm rid of them, like some other fine things that were not for me, and were not all gold though they glittered.'

He stretched out his arms in his shirt-sleeves, and then throwing himself down in a

chair, rested them on the table before him, and leant his head upon his hands.

'Does aught ail you, Sir William?' she asked with genuine anxiety; 'there is always gin or rum in the house. I know you don't taste drink as a rule, but when you are overdone and would be the better for a glass, wouldn't you have it? Just say the word.'

'No,' he said, looking up with a haggard face, 'don't ask me. Do you know, Honor, the last little straw between me and drowning in the lowest depths of sin and misery is that I forswore drink, at the word of a dying woman. But I'm not ill or in trouble—at least, I'm going to turn over a new leaf, and be all right after to-night. I am glad your father is out.'

'Why so, sir?' inquired Honor, a little coldly.

'Don't "sir" me,' he forbade her hastily.

'But how can that be, when you are Sir William, and our squire and master?' she demanded with a startled laugh.

'I ain't Sir William to you—anyhow I don't want to be so any more, and if I continue your master, it is only on the understanding that you be my mistress. Honor, I'm glad

your father is out, because I want to tell you all about myself—a poor subject,’ he broke off with a bitter laugh.

‘If you are in a story-telling humour, I ain’t the one to baulk it,’ said Honor, dying to hear what he had got to tell.

He started at once, as if eager to begin; describing his early days and the shifts his sister Jen had made to provide for their needs—details very patent to Honor’s comprehension. He went on to his youthful outbreaks, not extenuating or omitting a single particular of his enlisting, his successful career as a soldier in India, marred by his habits of dissipation and wild recklessness, and his last outrage against military discipline till he lay in the cell awaiting the sentence of the lash.

‘Oh! poor lad, poor lad! This was worse even than my Hughie’s fate,’ cried Honor, moved to the depths of her soul by what she could so well understand. Forgetting the difference of rank she put her hand on his shoulder and began to stroke his arm.

He looked up at her, with his face wan from the strain of the last twenty-four hours, and the agony of the associations he had been recalling.

'So you pity me, Honor, after you have heard nigh-hand the worst, for my sister Jen died and then her husband hanged himself. You ain't shocked past looking on me as a fellow-creature.'

'Shocked! what should I be shocked at? I could cry my eyes out for you, if that would do you any good.'

'I know,' he said softly; 'and you are the woman for me, the woman who knows all, and yet does not cast me off, and treat me as dirt beneath her feet.'

'Who cast you off, Sir William?' Honor inquired point-blank, without any of the restraining delicacy that might have shut her mouth, had she been a woman of a different temper and rearing.

'Never mind,' he said, flushing hotly; 'and didn't I tell you not to call me "Sir William" any more? say, "Will Thwaite, I will marry you, and help you to bear your burden." We'll go our own way and be happy in our own fashion. We'll cast care to the winds and not waste a thought on our betters, or suffer them to lay a little finger on our lot.'

He spoke excitedly and a little wildly, though he had not been drinking.

She sat and stared at him, not able to believe her ears, at this instantaneous and wonderful solution of the riddle she had been trying to read.

‘Are you in earnest?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘In earnest! What do you take me for? I have spoken my whole mind—made a clean breast of it for the first time these many months, and, by George! I feel as if I could breathe freely and be a man again, and not a mountebank and puppet. Will you not make my freedom and happiness complete by coming to me, Honor, and letting me know I’ve a real friend—one that knows me—all about me, and looks over all that’s sorely amiss in me, all I lack, and all I’ve done wrong, and cares for me in spite of all?’

He spoke with eager passion as if he had no other desire; and it was true that making a clean breast of it, as he called it, had been an immense relief to him. For he had been a man naturally open as the day, on whom the unaccustomed reticence of the last period of his life, the concealment and shamming, as he had been tempted to call them, had hung with the dead-weight of iron fetters. He was also a man who, as a matter of tempera-

ment, craved sympathy; to whom a woman's immeasurable tenderness had once been so familiar that he had lived surrounded by it, without thinking of it, but, once lost, it was for ever missed.

She sat dazzled. What! could she be the mistress of Whitehills at a word? But it was not of the grand house, and servants at her call, of soft living, fine clothes, and being a titled lady that she thought first and most. The attractions which would have been all-powerful with most poor girls did not lay hold of her to any great extent. It was to be the mistress, through him who was their master—the man that thus addressed her—of the lands and the woods where she had ranged on sufferance or in secret, of the wild creatures that had been her solace and her prey; to come and go when she liked and how she liked; to defy the upper-keepers and have her father do the same—these were the ideas which took possession of her.

It was on second thoughts that she considered she would be regarded with mingled consternation, admiration, and lively envy by everybody she knew—the colony at the quarries, her mother's people with whom she

had kept company, and the field-workers who had so lately held her at arms'-length.

Neither was the man himself distasteful to her. She had the liking for him that many persons—women especially—entertain for those they happen to succour, to the length of rescuing him from a possible death.

His tale had filled her with a tumult of fellow-feeling and pity, for just so had the poor lad to whom her heart had been given in early girlhood been set upon, driven to stand at bay, and then forced to pay the penalty to the utmost tittle of the law. And while she had been saying to herself, within the hour, that Hughie Guild's lineaments were waxing dim in a memory which had long been faithful to him, the comely features of another, the manly figure on which she set such store, the soldierly carriage—reminding her of the great man of her family, Uncle Sam—the waves of chestnut hair, the ruddy colour, the smile she could call forth, which was able to brighten indescribably what had perplexed her in the gravity, almost sombreness, of Sir William Thwaite's face, were all now taking her fancy and knocking at her heart.

Her indignant spirit, which from the date

of Hughie Guild's cruel death had set womanly rules and household restraints at defiance, was in sympathy with his spirit when he threatened to turn upon the class into which he had been grafted and shake off its yoke. Her nature, run wild, was yet full of *esprit de corps* and class prejudices, which disposed her to war with the upper ranks generally, while her lawlessness also inclined her to strive with her very fellows, nay, with herself and him when the time came.

It would be the best game she had ever played for her and ‘Will Thwaite’ to set up Liberty Hall at Whitehills. The temptation to answer ‘Yes’ to Sir William's question was strong, and growing stronger every instant while she hesitated. But to Honor Smith's credit she made a stand. ‘What about Miss Compton?’ she said suspiciously, watching him closely. ‘This ben't in keeping with your walking about the hayfield your two selves, and speaking to me, like you were the friends and sweethearts as folk would have it you were. I shan't speak another word till you tell me the right-down truth about Miss Compton. Her ain't saucy, nor do she take up poor folk like playthings or babbies, to

pass away the time and be taught by her wisdom, as if hard times weren't a mighty sight powerfuller teachers than fine ladies and rectors' wives and daughters. But her's real good, and were rare kind to me long ago; and though all that soon came to an end, it were none of her fault. She's a deal nearer heaven, I guess, than the likes of me, or maybe you either. Yet if you have been sweet upon her, and she have but looked on you to listen to you—though knowing summat of you both, I'm free to confess,' owned Honor candidly, 'I do not see as how that could be—still, if them words you have spoken ain't no more than the outcome of some quarrel between you two, I tell you, lad, I don't want to listen to a fellow mad with rage and jealousy. I shan't come between you. Go and make it up with the fine young lady, and let me be. I'll forget your words before you're out of the door. I'm none so set on a man, or on being Lady Thwaite,' she said, with a toss of her head, 'that I should bear them in mind and plague you for your hasty folly.'

'You're all out, Honor,' he answered, with a loud laugh, 'except in not being able to see how metal and clay could mix together. Miss

Compton would no more quarrel with me than she would quarrel with the servant at the back of her chair ;' he ground his teeth as he made the illustration. 'Her single word with him would be to dismiss him from her presence and forbid him ever to enter it again. So you see, though she may be good—I would be lying like a trooper if I pretended she were not good—she ain't good to me. I'll never speak to her again while we live. I tell you I have done with the whole small fry of ladies and gentlemen in which she was the single creature worth a sigh. What is the use of a man's succeeding to land and money if he cannot please himself? I have found out that at last, and if you and Abe won't have me, Honor, I don't know what is to become of me. Perhaps, as nobody wants me, I had better put a bullet through my head, and have done with it all, at once.'

'Not so fast as that, Will ; and who says as nobody wants you? I want you, and I'll do my best to make up to you, and be a good wife, as I would have been to poor Hughie. You have heard of Hughie Guild? I ben't a bit ashamed of Hughie, not at this moment, when I seems to be giving up the last thought

of him,' she went on, with a flash of her eyes and a swell of her fine throat. 'I ain't going to hide what him and me were to each other, when we walked out on the long summer nights, and met for a word in the frosty winter mornings, and my heart was tender and trusty, like his'n. Oh! I doubt I was better worth looking at, and speaking to both, in them far-off days than I am now,' she exclaimed wistfully, with a glance at the black gown she still wore for Hughie, and a twitch at one of the ends of the red handkerchief. Then she struck a chord in perfect harmony with his mood, 'I don't want to have secrets from you.'

'You're right there,' he said with emphasis. 'Secrets be hanged! We've done with them for ever, and there shan't stand one between you and me.' He clasped her hands, and drew her unresisting towards him. 'I tell you, Honor, I thought I should have died, or burst out cursing, and shouting aloud my story, with an adder's nest of secrets in my breast stinging night and day. Now it will go hard with us, my lass, if we can't be enough for ourselves, and have a jolly good time while it lasts. We're young, and strong, and have a liking for each other. There's plenty of life

before us, and surely it holds something worth taking for us still. Let your Hughie sleep—he's the best off after all ; I'll not rake him up, and you'll not cast Nhilpoor in my teeth, though you have heard all about it. We're quits and we're equals ; only, I take it, you are made of kinder and truer stuff than I. A woman that ain't bad, or that ain't akin to the angels—when her very goodness robs her of earthly feelings, has more heart than a man for the most part. I know you've been a trifle wild on moonlight nights and misty mornings with the snares, ay, and the guns, among my birds and hares, mine—do you hear, Honor ? I could have you up before the justices, before Mr. Hollis, who called himself my friend the other night. You'll have to be mortal kind and give me all my own way to keep me from taking the law on you. And what about the wild-ducks that flew over from Mistley Down ? Have you been seeking their eggs lately, or are the nests flown ? They are all yours now, every bird and beast, bush and furrow. You and your father will have to keep my preserves, in good faith, when neither him nor you will ever need to poach on them or any other again.'

'It is handsome in you to put it in that

way,' said Honor frankly. Then she added, after a moment's reflection, with an echo both of humour and sadness in her tone: 'But I doubt half the fun will be gone.'

Old Abe strayed in to be dumfounded by the most astounding tale that ever shook the nerve of keeper or squatter. The Squire, Sir William, was going to marry straight away, without either compunction, commotion, or concealment, the daughter of his servant, the least reputable of his servants, the under-keeper, suspected of being in league with the poachers. And his strapping randy of a daughter, the bride-elect, who was all but the widow of a young poacher that had died in gaol, had been an active sharer in her father's misdeeds.

'It ain't to be believed,' cried Abe, though the incredible tale was to the marvellous exaltation of himself and his family. 'It can't be; who ever heard tell of such a marriage?'

'Why, it was the very marriage made by my great-grandfather, Abe, or I should not have been here,' said Sir William, laughing.

'No, no; he weren't the head of the house or like to be, only one of a litter of young puppies. And the keeper as he connected his-

self with,' continued Abe modestly, 'was the head-keeper on the estate, like Waterpark, a man of substance in his line, sought after and employed by other families, even after his daughter had got him into disgrace with the Thwaites. Old people did say he had got no other daughters, and that her that would be a lady had gone to school with the bailiff's daughter, was the beauty of them parts, washed her face in butter-milk and saved her complexion like the finest lady of them all. Now, my Hon is as brown as a gipsy, is no scholard, and knows more of guns and game-bags, begging your honour's pardon, than of needles and pins.'

'But if I prefer a brown gipsy and a brave woman that could save a man's life at a pinch—not that it was worth the perilling her own for—ain't it my own look-out, old crusty-boots?' argued Sir William, with a rough good-humour.

'You'll take your own way,' said Abe resignedly, 'but as an honest man I'm bound to say I can't see that Hon here, though she ben't a bad daughter to me, is fit to be a grand lady. She ain't the cut of one, and

ill will come of such flying in the face of Providence. It was clean different that the Squire should befriend us because her picked he out of the water—she done it and no mistake—and he were welcome to come over and have a pipe, if not a glass, and a talk any night he pleased. Nobody could say nought agin it; that were no more than nat'ral. But t'other ain't nat'ral. A most oonlikely, oonshuitable marriage is summat serious, and will lead to no end of rows, and bring the whole county-side down on us. I'm getting an old man—too old to have both gentle and simple down upon me, or to change my ways,' sighed Abe, drawing out an old flat snuff-box, taking snuff and 'sneezing a further remonstrance.

'Who's asking you to change your ways? and I ain't going to be a grand lady, you stupid, grumpy old father!' cried Honor, who had taken and kept the upper hand of her father ever since her two brothers left the country. 'It is Will Thwaite as is going to be a common man again, and suit hisself to the rest of us. Didn't I say the very first night we set eyes on him, that it were a fine thing—all the finer that it were as new as the

first paring of the moon, to have a squire as were one of ourselves ?

'But I said he weren't none of ourselves, below the skin, and were never like to be,' muttered Abe.

'And it is just because I am head of the house that I can do as I like, and marry whom I will—Honor if she will have me, to-morrow, or as soon as the banns can be put up. There's nought to wait for. We aren't going to have a flare-up like—like some I've seen. We needn't call together a crowd of fools and flunkeys to pity and laugh at us, though we'll do the thing in open day ; we ain't ashamed of ourselves neither. You don't want to wait for fine clothes, do you, Honor, when I like you best as you sit there ?'

'That's a pretty compliment,' pronounced Honor impartially, 'but you might have spared it, or kept it for another time, Will. I don't care a straw for fine clothes. More than that, father and I ain't able to buy them. More than that again, I wouldn't take a gift of a gownd from you now, not though you went down on your bended knees, or swore never to see me more, if so be I refused your gifts.

As father says, it were different when we were your servants to command, and you might spin down half-a-crown or a guinea for me, as your purse was full and your temper generous, in exchange for my washing your clothes or blacking your boots. But not a shilling of yours will I touch now—not till it is your right to give, and mine to take, Sir William Thwaite. That's settled between us; you ain't to come swaggering here and emptying your purse into my lap—not that I say you'd care to do it—mind, me and father knows you're a better gentleman than that comes to, a deal more of a gentleman than lots as have been brought up to the trade. I say, Will,' Honor resumed suddenly, after a moment's pause, with a doubtful, searching look in her great grey eyes, 'I'm most afeared of that gentleman as is in you—wherever you got it, deep down, part of yourself, till death let it out—that it won't mate proper with the wild, rude woman, granting I've kept myself honest for Hughie's sake, that is in me. But ain't it a mercy,' changing her tone, with equal abruptness, to a crow of congratulation this time, 'that you have neither father nor mother nor nobody to make a stir and sunder us? You're

your own master, though you are the Squire, as if you were one of our boys, Ted or young Abe, as always went in for pleasing themselves, when they were at home.'

'Ay; you'll all please yourselves,' said old Abe, throwing off the responsibility, as he was wont to do, and becoming naturally more and more reconciled to the honour that had come to him, in proportion as he recovered from his stunned incredulity; 'you'll please yourselves and take the consequences, which will be a mighty promotion for Honor. I make bold to hope, likewise, it will be the keeping of this here tumble-down cottage and my place, whatever stories Waterpark tells agin me, till my death, without my having to quit the old country.'

'You'll get your choice, Abe,' announced Sir William, with reckless prodigality; 'your old quarters here, or the best quarters with us at Whitehills.'

'Father will stay here,' said Honor decisively. 'He would not ever be at home out of this hole, but I'll come and see him, and he'll come and see me, whenever we weary for each other's faces; shan't we, daddy?'

'Then, since it's all fixed, I'll go home,' said

Sir William, getting up and stretching himself again. 'I'll be here to-morrow, of course, but to-night I'm dizzy like—dizzy with freedom from care, and content, Honor. I feel as if I had been standing on my head for half a year, but that will come right with a night's sleep: everything will come right when I'm back in the part I'm fit for, that I know how to play as well as my neighbours—nobody can cast scorn upon me then.'

Honor helped him on with his coat, nay, she convoyed him half the way back to White-hills in the summer dusk, laughing at his questioning her whether she were not tired, scouting at the idea of her not liking to be out alone in the late twilight—not offending against the *convenances*, where there were none to be set at nought.

CHAPTER XX.

AN INTERVIEW.

SIR WILLIAM had to learn that, practically alone in the world as he was, he could not be suffered to please himself without somebody's interfering to prevent his ruin.

The first sign of the interference was to be detected in Lady Thwaite's driving over to Lambford in hot haste, within three days of the Whitehills hay-making, and begging to see Lady Fermor alone before luncheon, when there was security against other visitors.

Lady Thwaite need not have said 'alone' in reference to Iris, who had not been accustomed to spend her mornings with her grandmother. But the Mildmays had stayed two days longer than had been anticipated, to suit their own convenience, Lady Fermor did not hesitate to remark, and Lady Thwaite was not sure that they were gone at last, when she

sent in her card with a corner turned down, and a pencilled request to see Lady Fermor in her dressing-room.

‘Show her up,’ had been the immediate rejoinder. ‘What’s in the wind now?’ Then she added, just out of the servant’s hearing: ‘At least, I’ll find out what has become of my sulking gentleman these last two days.’

Lady Fermor’s dressing-room was the cosiest room in Lambford, but it was also the dullest, with a deadly dulness to a stranger. It did not afford the slightest evidence that its mistress had a single taste or interest beyond her personal concerns and what went on in her own mind. There were no little groups of family miniatures or photographs above the chimney-piece, no washed-out, characteristic children’s heads reappearing in sketches in crayons of self-conscious boys and girls, and ending in portraits, in water-colours or oils, of mature men and women—though Lady Fermor had been twice married, and was a grandmother with half-a-dozen grandchildren, in descent from her first husband, in addition to Iris Compton, the grand-daughter of the second. There were no little trophies of her own or of the members of her families’ resi-

dence in foreign places, in stone, or bronze, or ivory, woodwork or basketwork, Indian embroidery or grass cloth, ending in the merest trifles of nickknacks formed out of twisted vine-twigs and plaited palm-leaves, and carved juniper-root. There were no books and no work. Lady Fermor read the newspapers, but nothing else, and she never worked. She sat with her shrivelled, bony hands in her lap, and went over her own thoughts, often busying herself with the scenes and people of the past. One might have thought the process in this case would hardly have been pleasant. But, pleasant or unpleasant, Lady Fermor was equal to it. She preferred her own identity to that of any other person, and reviewed the events of her earlier life without shrinking, simply because they had belonged to her life, and so had always possessed keen relish of some kind for her.

There was not a portrait of Lord Fermor in the room, but there were several engravings from pictures of his favourite horses to enliven his wife's sanctum ; and the ink-bottle which she used for the business jottings she still made, at the heavy old writing-table, was composed of one of the hoofs of the Lambford

horse which had been the most distinguished of the season at Newmarket.

Summer and winter a brisk fire burned in Lady Fermor's dressing-room, the atmosphere of which was heavily laden with old Jockey Club scent, while there was no replenishment of oxygen from the closed windows. This little fact alone would have made a visit to its mistress in her den, on a sultry August morning, a trial to any person full of modern theories of health, and with fresh-air proclivities. But in addition, Lady Fermor indulged in a habit of having every visitor she entertained shown to the warmest corner. It might have been an unconscious impulse of her old hospitality, as that was now the physical good she craved most; or it might have been a plan to shorten and prevent visits at hours and in a region which she reserved for herself. Yet she had no occupation to be disturbed, and even no practices to be hidden, unless that she wore the worst shawls and dowdiest caps, when nobody—not even Fermor or Pollock—could see them.

‘What’s in the wind, Lady Thwaite?’ repeated Lady Fermor, without the smallest scruple, to the visitor, after the two had

greeted each other, and the hostess had seen Lady Thwaite established in close proximity to the glowing embers in the grate.

Lady Thwaite did not seem to notice the fire, or the thunderstorm, which had come on at last, though it had only partially discharged its artillery, leaving the air close and oppressive. But it was no wonder that her fair complexion looked heated almost to blowsiness. She was come on a trying errand. She had debated with herself, over and over again, in driving along whether she could not throw up the self-imposed commission and turn back.

‘It is all the fault of this wicked old woman and that silly child Iris. Why should I put myself about to break the miserable catastrophe to Lady Fermor? She would not let him alone; she would take him away from his natural friends and protectors. If he had been left to my guidance—but, no; honestly I do not think I could have made anything of a man who has ended like this; who has deceived us all, down to Mr. Mills, as Sir William has done; whose taste for low life has proved so pronounced and hopeless. But it is very hard on me, coming forward as I did, acting as the lady of the house—poor,

dear old house!—at that detestable hay-making, which was all Lady Fermor's doing. I wish with all my heart I had gone abroad at once, after poor Sir John died, and remained away till I had some grounds to go on, with regard to the new man.'

But wishes were even more unavailing for the past than for the future. Here was Lady Thwaite, sitting all but suffocated in Lady Fermor's dressing-room. She had taken upon herself a thankless task. She was indignantly conscious of her own innocence, and yet she dreaded to tell the sinner the result of her machinations.

Lady Fermor, on the contrary, was coolly cracking her finger-joints, and asking what was in the wind. The next moment she behaved still more abominably. Having, unfortunately, established a 'way' of saying with impunity what nobody else would have said, she proceeded to remark—with a most objectionably sardonic flavour in her objectionable jocularities, as if the explanation suggested were far removed from the list of possible events:

'You ain't going to be married again, Lady Thwaite?'

‘ Good heavens, no ! ’ cried poor Lady Thwaite, provoked out of her usual assured composure and seasoned agreeability. ‘ Have you forgotten that Sir John is not yet a year dead ? Everybody is not so—— ’ she stopped in time.

‘ So fond of a second husband as I am. ’ The terrible old woman took up the sentence without hesitation, and with a chuckle. ‘ But you have only to try ; very likely you will find, like me, that your second bargain is a great improvement on the first. If Fermor were to slip away now, who knows but I might venture on a third ? Only I am too stiff to be troubled seeking another trousseau. ’

To do Lady Thwaite justice she shuddered. She did not even feel inclined, though she had dared, to retort with the taunt that it might not be necessary to wait for Lord Fermor’s slipping away ; Lady Fermor had not always stayed for that preliminary, or stood out for a trousseau.

Lady Thwaite could have her revenge in another fashion. But she was a practical woman, and revenge would not compensate for the awkward position in which she found herself, with the substantial losses it involved.

If anything could yet be tried—she did not believe it would be of any avail—still, everything ought to be tried to arrest such a calamity.

Lady Thwaite, being fallible, did permit herself to say coldly :

‘The same example would scarcely suit us all,’ while she still meant to make common cause with Lady Fermor, so far as inducing the intrepid, hardened old offender to enter the lists and take the bull by the horns. ‘But you are not altogether wrong,’ began the bringer of bad tidings. ‘It is a marriage I am come to announce—a dreadful marriage, which calls for no congratulations.’

Lady Fermor sat up in her chair with a little start ; it might have been the tremor of age, however, for her hands remained perfectly still, and she said nothing.

‘Do you remember a woman in the hay-field the other day ?’ proceeded Lady Thwaite falteringly.

‘Who was the woman ?’ demanded Lady Fermor, with as much sharpness as if she had been an adverse counsel cross-examining a shrinking witness.

‘A woman, not like the others, rather fine-

looking, in a coarse, masculine style. I think she wore a black gown and a red handkerchief shading her head.'

'Yes!' snapped Lady Fermor; 'go on.'

'Do you remember Sir William taking notice of her, and talking to her more than once? I think people observed it, though he did nothing very much out of the way.'

'Well?'

'Their banns are given in to be published next Sunday,' said Lady Thwaite, driven by her companion's manner to make haste and tell her tale in its naked simplicity.

'You are mad, Lady Thwaite—stark, staring mad!' cried Lady Fermor, rising to her feet, grasping the arms of her chair, while a thin, pallid red came into her cadaverous face.

'I almost wish I were, for the moment,' said Lady Thwaite, with a groan. 'But it is too true, too disgracefully, ruinously true.'

'And have you done nothing?' Lady Fermor broke out furiously, instinctively seeking the relief which a scapegoat affords. 'Have you stood by and seen this scandal, this outrage against common-sense and good feeling, and the propriety you are all so fond

of talking about, take place before your very eyes ?

‘What could I do ?’ Lady Thwaite remonstrated. ‘I am only the man’s distant cousin by marriage. I never heard what was going to happen till late last night ; it came upon me like a thunderbolt—I had been led to expect something so very different. But I was in time to telegraph to Mr. Miles, and he was down before breakfast this morning.’

‘And what does Miles say ?’

‘Not much,’ said Lady Thwaite, with an expressive shrug. She was beginning to recover a portion of her equanimity so as to object to being browbeaten. She felt bound to treat the subject with more philosophic resignation than she had yet shown—nay, with a shade of the banter for which she was famous. ‘He owned that he was dreadfully disappointed, and that the ill-advised step would make a complete wreck of his client’s fortunes. All the same, I think Mr. Miles would have liked to have sworn at me for bringing him down, when the man was of age and his own master—an ignorant, untrained fellow, who could not be expected to stand opposition, even in his own interest, or to

follow rational argument, whom contradiction would only make worse. There was nothing to be done, any tyro might have seen that. After the mess was made and so far advanced, where was the use of bringing an unfortunate lawyer or anybody else down from town, to render the business more hopeless, if that were possible? Sir William had not sent for him to draw out the settlements. I never saw Mr. Miles so cross, and nearly rude, though we are too old friends to count plain-speaking rudeness. He did see Sir William, however; but as Mr. Miles left for London by the next train, without coming back to me, I conclude nothing can be done.'

'You're all as mad as Sir William,' cried Lady Fermor, without softening her opinion. 'The fellow ought to be taken away, and the woman shut up;' speaking as if the primitive customs of centuries ago were still in full force, as if the power which old aristocrats had once wielded unscrupulously enough on occasions, had never departed from their hands. But I'll go to him; I'll let him hear a piece of my mind.'

The resolution was what Lady Thwaite had

half hoped for as a last resource. But when it came to the point, while she entertained small expectation of the efforts producing even the little delay which might yet be of the greatest moment in arresting an irretrievable misfortune, she had qualms at sending the aged woman—let her be ever so much to blame—alone into the breach on this breathless summer day.

Lady Thwaite could not accompany Lady Fermor. Indeed, the younger woman would not on any account have attended the elder on the expedition to which Lady Thwaite had nevertheless spurred on Lady Fermor. After all, Sir William Thwaite, though he was Sir John's heir, and Sir John's widow had intended him to continue to be the purveyor of many social advantages to her, was happily no relation of hers, but a remote and disowned kinsman of her late husband. It was only an irregular skirmisher in the campaign of life, an old alien from social laws, a woman who had never cared anything for public opinion, who could go to Sir William, and either in utter disregard of what had been said, or in unblushing reference to it and to what had really taken place between him and

Iris Compton, seek to stop his degrading, desperate marriage.

'I am afraid it will be too much for you, Lady Fermor,' Lady Thwaite managed to say, as Lady Fermor was ringing for her maid; 'try and think over it. At least, let Soames go with you. I am sure you do not know what a trying day it is. We shall have another storm immediately, and you may be caught in the rain, with the damp so bad for your rheumatic gout. Sir John had to avoid it carefully, and—oh dear! I believe you have not taken your luncheon,' lamented Lady Thwaite, fanning her hot face.

She began to yield to a painful conviction that if anything happened suddenly to Lady Fermor in consequence of these unusual exertions and deprivations, the most lenient coroner's inquest in the country might feel justified in requesting Lady Thwaite's attendance, and in seizing the opportunity of the evidence she would be compelled to give, to censure her for her inhumanity.

'Am I to sit here and eat a chop while a poor deluded young devil—excuse me, Lady Thwaite, but you ain't averse to plain-speak-

ing—a friend of my own, is on the brink of a precipice?’ Lady Fermor asked scornfully. ‘That is not what I call friendship, and I have had a man-friend or two in my day. It seems Soames thinks she may sit and guzzle, whatever is up; but I’ll teach the idiot better manners than to keep me waiting,’ ringing the bell at her elbow violently a second time in rapid succession.

Soames answered in haste, and her mistress, with no more than a promise to give it to Soames hot and strong in some moment of leisure, despatched the maid to collect wraps, and to send another servant to order the carriage.

‘It seems all so unreal and shocking,’ said Lady Thwaite, feeling helpless for once in her life. Yet she was not averse to do more talking in the presence of the fiery zeal which could still blaze up in the shrunken veins of the woman of fourscore—the woman of another, more turbulent generation. ‘Of course it is in his blood,’ repeated Lady Thwaite, not without a recollection of her objection to Iris Compton for the taint in her blood, ‘and I have heard that the woman pulled him out of some ditch and saved his life. What was a

great hulking fellow like him doing, dropping after the fashion of a stone into a pool of standing water, and suffering himself to be rescued by a woman—unless he did it on purpose—what was he good for if he could not take care of himself? Certainly, if he is not useful, he cannot be called ornamental. But if it had been some neat, pretty girl—dressmaker's assistant, or sewing-maid, or head-waitress in a restaurant, whose smartness and mock jewellery a man of low origin on the whole, and no education to speak of, might have mistaken for the real things, I could have understood it better; for such *esclandres*, however deplorable, do happen, now and then, among people one knows. But a masculine creature such as this woman Smith is, I am told, as bad as a gipsy, who consorts with poachers—indeed, she was to have married a wretched young fellow who died in gaol—only the lowest, most depraved instincts, I am afraid, could have exposed a man to danger from such a quarter. Her father has been suspected of underhand dealings with poachers and with game-shops in Birkett and Cavesham; I know her brothers went all wrong years ago.'

‘How do you know?’ inquired Lady Fermor ungraciously.

‘Oh, I used to hear everything about our people when I was at Whitehills. Most unfortunately it was a hobby of poor Sir John’s, after his mind had begun to fail a little, that Waterpark, the head-keeper, and a capable, trustworthy man, but comparatively a new-comer, trumped up stories and bore a grudge against Smith, who had lived all his life on the estate, whom Sir John remembered from a boy. So he was allowed to remain in a cottage like an Irish hovel at Hawley Scrub. The girl has grown up there, and ranged in the preserves, and over the downs, at all hours, wearing a black gown, and some yellow or red rag of a handkerchief round her throat or over her head. I think it must be an affectation of a gipsy costume, or in rude coquetry, for she is not bad-looking in that style. They say that she can not only fire a gun and throw a line, but swallow a glass of spirits undiluted without a cough, and swear an oath like a man. It is too horrible to think of her as Lady Thwaite,’ protested the prospective dowager.

In fact, she was so overcome between the

idea and the heat of the room that she took up a bottle of the old Jockey Club scent, and began to pour it over her handkerchief, though she hated the perfume. All would not do to put down the image of Iris Compton in her fair, slender, delicate-minded, almost austere maidenliness, as it rose up in broad contrast before the speaker's mind.

‘ You might have spared yourself the horror of thinking it all over again, and your breath the pain of telling it to me,’ said Lady Fermor coolly; ‘ I know all about the woman. My unworldly saint and dutiful innocent of a grand-daughter picked up an acquaintance with this Honor Smith which I forbade years ago. . . But I’ll put you right on one point, Lady Thwaite. Men who are men, like Thwaite, ain’t always caught by soft skins, dainty tongues, and a few trumpery accomplishments. They sometimes look for bone and sinew, ay, and courage and daring in the women they care for, as well as in the horses they squander their means and their lives on. What pretty nursemaid or sewing-girl could have had the pluck and strength to help to drag a drowning man of Thwaite’s weight out of a bottomless pit of mud, like some of the

ponds here? All the same, he is raving mad, and will be a lost man, if he go on to reward me and punish a doll of a young lady, as he proposes to do. Here is Soames with my shawls; I must not keep you longer, Lady Thwaite.'

When Lady Thwaite was gone, as Lady Fermor was slowly descending the stairs to depart on her mission, she encountered her grand-daughter coming up. Iris had been away in other regions all the morning. She had not been aware of Lady Thwaite's visit, or heard the most distant sough of her news, though the hall and kitchen, which had come into contact with Lady Thwaite's groom, were already ringing with the tidings. Iris had not only her hands but her arms full of ferns, which she had been gathering in the park, and was intending to use according to some incontrovertible art formula. She was singing softly to herself an old English song:

'Be she fairer than the day,
Or the dewy meads in May,
If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?'

'Grandmamma,' she exclaimed, 'going out just now! Do you not wish me to accom-

pany you? Do you know there is a storm brewing? I came in because the sky looked quite lurid.'

'Get out of my way, Iris,' said Lady Fermor savagely; 'and if I find what I expect—a man worth a dozen of you doomed to be ruined body and soul, made dead to the world henceforth, by your virtuous, godly doing—I warn you, girl, to keep out of my sight for some time to come!'

Iris, amazed and aghast, was pushed aside by the weak arm, and stood leaning against the banisters till her grandmother had disappeared. Then the girl began to creep slowly up to her own room, hanging her head, with half of her brittle-stemmed ferns broken and crushed in her tightened grasp.

To Iris's fresh astonishment and apprehension, Soames, after she had seen Lady Fermor into the carriage, followed Iris, and sought admission to her.

Soames was not a favourite in the house. She was a hard-featured, cold-natured woman. The impression was that so much was taken out of her to enable her to keep her post to the last by Lady Fermor, so as to entitle her to the annuity which was believed to be

settled on the maid on duty at the time of her mistress's death, that poor Soames had nothing left wherewith to propitiate the favour of the world. She had never made a pet of Iris, as some of the other elder servants had comforted their consciences and hearts by doing. Soames had rather regarded the young lady as standing somehow in the maid's light.

But now Soames begged to speak with Iris, and there was smouldering compassion in the woman's dull eyes, and duller voice, when she said :

'If I were you, Miss Compton, I would walk over to the Rectory, and stay there for a day or two, as you sometimes do. If Lady Fermor inquires for you, I'll take it upon me to explain that you understood what she said, on the stairs, as a wish to be left to herself for a little while. My lady has her humours like most ladies of her rank and age, I suppose,' said Soames, hesitating a little in the caution which was an instinct with her, 'and she's in a bad one this morning; and if I were you, Miss Compton, I would not fly in the face of it, but keep out of her way, as she bade you, till the worst pass over. If

you will believe me, I am speaking for your good.'

'I do believe you. I am much obliged to you, Soames,' said Iris humbly, in her bewilderment and alarm. 'But what can have happened since breakfast? What is the worst that you say will pass over?'

'It is about Sir William Thwaite's marriage, I think, miss,' said Soames, perhaps not altogether reluctant, with all her lack of geniality, to retail an astounding piece of gossip to a person deeply concerned in it, and to be the first to note its effect.

'Sir William Thwaite's marriage!' echoed Iris, turning crimson and drawing back, because she was not able to conjure up in her mind any bride for Sir William, save the one who had been set apart for him, whom he had so lately and so ardently sought in vain.

'Yes, Miss Compton,' said Soames stolidly, though she did not fail to perceive the reddened cheeks and the erect head. 'I do not like to mention such a thing to a lady, least of all to a young lady; but you'll hear it in church on Sunday with the rest of the parish. Sir William is to marry Honor Smith, the daughter of one of his under-keepers;

her that my lady stopped coming to you with berries and nuts, and such trash, when you were a young miss and she a slip of a girl.'

Iris laughed. She seemed fated to show her feelings in this fashion at different crises in her history. She laughed again the same nervous, quivering laughter to which she had yielded when Lady Thwaite congratulated her on her approaching marriage with this very Sir William Thwaite.

Soames's touchy feelings were hurt.

'You may not credit the story,' she said gloomily, 'but I am afraid it is gospel truth. My lady has driven over to Whitehills to be at the bottom of it. And, if you will take my advice, Miss Compton—excuse me for offering it twice—you will go down to the Rectory till the disturbance has blown over.'

Soames retreated, feeling that she had done her duty, and had been treated as most people who can thus justify themselves in their own eyes may expect to be served.

The perfect confidence with which Soames had spoken, together with Iris's knowledge of the maid's prudent nature, had really robbed the listener of all incredulity from the first. Her earliest sensation was one of overwhelm-

ing humiliation, not so much because of Sir William's inconstancy as because of her rival and successor in his regard. Iris Compton had been deeply mortified, in her girlish dignity and self-respect, by his having utterly mistaken her friendliness, and addressed her as no man who was not her equal, whom she had not favoured in the light of a lover, ought to have spoken to her. How was she to feel when she heard that he had instantly transferred his suit to poor Honor Smith, whom she had known as a ragged little girl, and lamented over to him—of all men—because she was different from the humblest cottager or working woman in the field, in her unwomanly, vagabond habits?

Iris thought next of the wrath of Lady Fermor, and then she asked herself if she would take Soames's advice. It went against the grain with the girl to flee from, instead of facing, the expression of the resentment she had provoked. On the other hand, she was docile to whoever sought to lead her in good faith. She did not question Soames's commiseration; perhaps, also, the maid was concerned for her old mistress. And ought Iris to risk injuring her grandmother by provoking

her to further paroxysms of passion, no longer usual with her, and solely exhausting to the frame, which had held together through all the troubles of over eighty years?

In the meantime Lady Fermor drove the short distance, panting a little from the intolerable airlessness under the low sky, seeing the cattle standing in groups under any shelter they could find, or straying home, in single, file, in their distress.

The place did not look the same, though it was only three days since she had been presiding at a *fête champêtre* there, paving the way for Iris's becoming its mistress. The hay had all been carted off the meadow, which lay stripped and bare as in winter. The first half of the thunderstorm had committed havoc among the trees, bushes, and grass of the park, splitting up one oak, scattering leaves, beating down twigs, conveying an impression of how it must have laid low the glory of the summer garden, though the devastation there was unseen. All the merriment and gaiety, the light figures and pretty dresses, were gone. Nobody was visible. Whitehills lay as still as if it had been devastated by an earthquake, or as if a judgment was going to descend on the place.

Lady Fermor was fortunate in finding Sir William at home. He had been over at Hawley Scrub, but he had returned, and was in the library. Lady Fermor did not give him the opportunity of denying himself. She told Cumberbatch to show her up at once to his master. The butler was still in office, though he was labouring under great perturbation of mind, whether he ought not to give in his leave, like Mrs. Cray, because of the slur that had been cast on the family. But he did not contemplate a matrimonial alliance with the housekeeper, and, like men in the mass, as opposed to women in general, the gentleman was less impulsive and more practical than the lady. Knowing the terms his master had been on with Lady Fermor, and having some inkling of the old lady's temper and errand, it was a small satisfaction to Cumberbatch to obey her implicitly.

‘Serve him right for being such a thundering ass, with his jug of water and his book at meals—like a low-lived, radical scamp. If the haristocratic old party were to scratch his eyes out, bless you! I shouldn’t mind or interfere, not if I could help it.’

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER INTERVIEW.

LADY FERMOR began, without the slightest preamble or circumlocution, as soon as the door was closed.

‘Thwaite, what is this that I hear about your cutting your own throat?’

‘I don’t know what you mean by my cutting my own throat,’ he said a little sulkily; ‘but will you not take a seat, Lady Fermor?’

‘I would not, if my old limbs would serve me,’ she protested, sinking into the chair from which he had risen, and keeping him standing like a culprit before her. ‘You do know what I mean. It is I who want to be told what you mean by being the maddest, most misguided idiot that ever walked the earth, and by forswearing yourself into the bargain.’

‘Seems a man like me,’ he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets, ‘must take a good

deal from a woman. If I choose to cut my own throat, mayn't I do it if I like ?

'No, not if you have a friend who cares a straw for your welfare, not if there is a social policeman left.'

'Ain't there worse things than having done with one's self once and for all ?'

'Not that I know of, and I've lived a good many more years than you have,' protested the old lady steadily. 'It is like the broken neck in the old song—

' "A lover forsaken a new love may get,
But a neck that is broken can never be set."

Thwaite, did I not tell you to have patience, and she would come round ?'

'You told me false, Lady Fermor !' he cried quickly, walking away, and turning his back upon her for a moment to hide the torture she was inflicting on him. 'And I have to tell you that if you bring her name into this conversation I'll leave the room and leave the house, and you may stop till doomsday, and go, as indeed you must, without your errand.'

'Is this all you have to say to me ?' she asked in a lower key. 'Is this all the thanks

I'm to get?' she urged with pain as well as pleading in her failing voice.

An appeal like this had always gone to his heart.

'I know you've been good to me, Lady Fermor,' he exclaimed. 'I dare say you have meant kindly by me. Don't reckon me an ungrateful brute because I say it has all been a monstrous mistake. Don't force me to say you've been my worst enemy.'

'You are your own worst enemy, William Thwaite, if you force me to wash my hands of you, and to have done with you from this day.'

'It cannot be helped,' he said desperately. 'I believe it is the best thing that can happen now.'

'And do you make nothing of me, sir?' she reproached him bitterly. 'Do you give me up without so much as heaving a sigh? I believed I had secured a son for my old age. I meant to be like a mother to you; I swear it, Thwaite! I never thought so little of myself, or so much of another, in any friendship I ever formed. I sometimes fancied I was going to die soon; it was so like feeling good, as your simpletons and knaves pretend

to feel. I was a fool, and you have rewarded me finely for my folly.'

'Then, maybe, as a mother forgives her son's folly, you will forgive and forget mine some day, Lady Fermor,' he said shyly.

'Never!' she said with all her former rancour. 'It is not as if you only hurt me cruelly; it is the disgraceful insult you put upon me, after what I have wished to do for you, as you know, and everybody knows, by destroying yourself in the way you propose to do. Look here, Thwaite: I am aware the young woman did you a service—let us say, the greatest service one human being can render another. Let us say she took your eye, too, by way of change—men's eyes will rove out of their circle, and for old association's sake you might have a hankering after her; but she would never look for your marrying her. You could have pleased yourself, if need were, without people's being much the wiser, and made it up to her in another style. You might double or treble the settlement, because you have gone so far in a fit of pique and rage as to mention banns and the church, and commit yourself to the world.

'That is, my lady, if I understand you

rightly,' said Sir William, half-choking, his ruddy colour growing purple with fury, 'you would have me pay a woman for what you call the greatest service one human being can render another, and at the same time gratify a brute's inclinations by behaving like a villain and doing her the most damnable injury in my power, and then propose to heal it by money? I am not a gentleman; I do not pretend, as you call it, to have been a good man, or anything save a ne'er-do-well, drunken, degraded rascal, if you knew all; but I have not come to that yet—to what a great lady, an old woman on the brink of the grave, has brought her mouth to utter to a low beggar like me, young enough to be her grandson.'

She blenched a little before his rage. If there was anything she respected it was the whirlwind of a man's just anger. She had a perception of justice, and she sometimes accorded to the men whose manhood she could appreciate, the right to rule over themselves, over her, and over humanity at large. 'I grant it is awkward,' she said, 'and unpleasant and improper, and if you take to high-faluting you may call it all the bad names you choose. But you have got yourself

into the scrape, and if you will not break off from it, without another moment's shilly-shallying—availing yourself of your horses and your yacht—if you had one—but there are always the railways and screw-steamers—it will be the worse for you. My way of backing out is at least better for you and everybody, including the woman, mind, than your putting an end to yourself by marrying a drab like that.'

'By George, she's the woman I'll marry as soon as the banns are out!' he said with hard firmness. 'I might take out a licence; but we ain't ashamed of what we're going to do, and driven to huddle up the doing of it, as some of you fine folk are fain to try. I needn't tell you we ain't in the fashion neither, having no turn that way. Such being the case, will you have the goodness to mind your manners, Lady Fermor, and keep from calling my future wife names to my face, which I would not suffer for a second from a man, but must stomach from a woman—lady or not—because I cannot use my fists to her? I'll only say this, that whatever you may mean by a drab, I am free to tell you Honor Smith—my Honor

now—is an honest woman, which is more than can be said of every fine lady.’

She cowered as if he had dealt her a blow. ‘Boy,’ she said hoarsely, ‘whatever provocation I have given you, it is not you who should have used these words to me.’ She stumbled to her feet, and prepared to totter out of the room, while he stood, arrested in his violence, with an apology checked on his lips. He wished to give her his arm, which she had so often taken in preference to any other support ; but she waved him off. He followed her to the door, and heard the first roll of the thunder and splash of the rain. ‘Stay till the storm is over, Lady Fermor,’ he besought her humbly. ‘Your horses may be frightened ; you will catch your death of cold. If you will remain I’ll send Mrs. Cray—no, she went this morning, but Cumberbatch will fetch one of the maids ; I’ll not intrude on you.’

‘I would not stay another minute in your house, not though all the fires of heaven were launched on the earth and the deluge had come again. Do you remember the words of the play—not that you’ve been much in the way of Shakespeare’s plays—about not turning your worst enemy’s dog out of doors in a

pitiless storm? But if I had been the enemy or the dog I would have scorned the shelter of a false friend's roof, a man who could taunt and revile a woman, a grey-headed woman, old enough, as he has said himself, to be his mother's mother. You are not a gentleman—you are right there—you are not even a man, as I had stupidly thought you. Farewell to you, Sir William Thwaite; I have done with you.' She went down the wet steps, rejecting all assistance, was put into her carriage by her man, and turned her back on Whitehills.

Iris had gone to the Rectory, where she had sometimes taken refuge before, when she had been made to understand that her presence was not desired, in some specially troubled state of the Lambford atmosphere. She was always welcome, without a word asked, at the Rectory. It was a crowded, well-worn house, where even necessary expenses had to be pared down; but a place for her had never been wanting. The Rector did consider her a pet-lamb of his flock, though he was occasionally a little theatrical in implying the relation between them. There was no insincerity in his staginess. He was only somewhat flourishing and flowery in speech and action, by

nature, which caused him to be one of the most popular preachers within a considerable area. Lucy was quite proud of his eloquence. It had a different effect on Ludovic, who could not escape the suspicion that his father was apt to be grandiloquent, and that his pathos savoured now and then of bathos. He knit his brows sometimes—a strange exertion for King Lud when he was at home, and wished the governor could be curter and simpler in his speech. The Rector's loquacity helped to seal his son's lips—at the same time the young fellow knew his father too well not to be sensible, to his own great comfort, that his senior was single-minded and whole-hearted in all the rhetoric he indulged in.

Harassed little Mrs. Acton, born an anxious woman, and married on a small income, with a large family over which to spread the scanty supply of coin, had no time, as she frequently said half-plaintively, half-peevisly, for speechifying; but she still honoured and admired her husband for doing both what she could and could not do, and kept a corner in her crowded heart and mind for one who had grown up like a child of the family. This fact was not seriously impaired by the cir-

cumstance that Mrs. Acton—always under the necessity of looking at the pounds, shillings, and pence side of the question—had permitted certain worldly considerations to come in, where her regard for this outlying child of hers was concerned. Iris might prove a boon to her adopted brothers and sisters. Her antecedents were not all that could be desired. Lord and Lady Fermor had been a trial and care to the Rector throughout his incumbency; but they were a peer and peeress all the same, and Miss Compton, their granddaughter, would inherit a considerable fortune. No doubt she would marry suitably, whether her heart might or might not incline eventually to a distinguished naval officer, with whom she had been on intimate terms from childhood. Her early and constant association with the family of a clergyman, and a clergyman so much respected and admired as Mr. Acton was, afforded ample assurance that she had escaped any injury from having been brought up by her poor old grandmother and grandfather. It was not possible that Iris Compton could ever forget what she had owed to the Actons, or lose sight of the boys and girls of the Rectory, in after-life.

Ludovic was thankful to get another and more disengaged lady to play his accompaniments. Lucy hailed gladly the advent of her friend, and could count on her sincere opinion with regard to the progress of the choir, and her interest and help during Iris's stay at the Rectory in all the work of the parish which could fall to a clergywoman, in the little rubs with the curates, and in the Acton children's lessons.

Iris, whose life was in the shade, would have sunned herself, as she had done formerly, in the light of being thus welcomed and appropriated. Her spirits would have risen. She would have become the life of the Rectory while her visit lasted. But she had received a shock, and the news travelling fast had already reached the Rectory, and was disturbing it too, in a milder degree. There would have been some doubt and delicacy in discussing the topic of the hour before Iris Compton, if Lucy had not felt herself bound to come forward before her friend's arrival, and explain that Sir William's deplorable marriage could be nothing to Iris, nothing in the world. Lucy was driven to the verge of betraying trust, she was so determined to clear her

friend from the undeserved stigma of having been disgracefully jilted, and what was still worse, from the remotest suspicion of having entertained an unworthy preference—which could now only return, with prejudice, on the head of the person who had cherished the misplaced regard. Lucy just kept within bounds in solemnly assuring her listeners that she knew for certain Iris would never have listened to Sir William Thwaite, whom, no doubt, Lady Fermor had favoured, though there had not been such a person as Honor Smith, or though she had never crossed the gentleman's path, and he had stood firm, instead of tumbling headlong from the eminence to which he had been raised.

Thus Iris heard the general sentiment expressed, with no more reservation than was likely to be used in any of the country houses round. Everybody was holding up his or her hands for the moment, and crying, with Lady Thwaite, that *mésalliances* were in the blood—as if family traits, like the best-regulated comets, were bound to return at stated intervals. The regret was general that the fellow had ever been taken up in the fashion he had been, though coming events neither did nor could

cast their shadows before. And as Sir William had unhappily succeeded to the family title and estates, it was not easy to see how his neighbours could have avoided recognising him, while he had behaved as if he meant to keep quiet, improve himself, and do his duty.

Mrs. Acton lamented the loss of Whitehills from a visiting list, which was inevitably short, for girls who could not go much from home, and yet ought to see a little society. She did not even think she could call there with her subscription-book, if the new Lady Thwaite proved the dreadful woman she was represented to be. Since the Smiths did not come to church, and Honor had been systematically kept from school, Mrs. Acton had no personal acquaintance with the offender. The clergyman's wife spoke as if she feared that if she presented herself at Sir William Thwaite's house—which it was her duty or Lucy's to do, and the matron must enter the breach to shield her daughter—then, when the visitor mentioned the Zenana Mission or the Coal and Blanket Clubs, and took out her subscription-book, the mistress of the establishment might have recourse to some appalling practice—

point a gun or swear an oath to drive the intruder away.

The Rector declared it was a highly unsuitable marriage, which did not recommend itself to him in any light. He had trusted that Sir William Thwaite was assuming his ancestral responsibilities, and preparing to discharge the obligations of his rank and position in a manner becoming his—well, he could not say his birth and education, but he might put it—with some regard to the influence of his wealth and rank in the county. Instead, there was this utterly unbecoming, rash, ill-omened step, which was calculated to bring contempt on his order, and at the same time to heighten, rather than to decrease, class antagonism.

‘I am rather sorry for the poor beggar,’ King Lud stood up for the assailed man; ‘though I do not believe he has any soul for music. You remember I could not agree with you on his waltzing, Miss Compton? Possibly the coming Lady Thwaite has never seen him waltz. I consider the loss is mutual—indeed, rather the greater on her side. She seems to be game all through—a splendid wife for the last of the great travellers, or the settler on the remotest verge of civilization—she will be

more lost at Whitehills than he can be, though he should fall back into her set.'

'Don't talk nonsense, my dear boy,' insisted Lucy. 'He must be a horrible man to have known anything better, and then to select a wild woman, a heathen, for his wife. I don't suppose she was ever so much as taught her Church Catechism. I know both papa and Mr. Venables were refused admittance to the cottage at Hawley Scrub—at least, they could never find anybody at home when they called; could you, papa?'

When Lucy was alone with her friend, then Lucy caught Iris's hands. 'It seems almost wrong to congratulate you on the dreadful folly of another person; but oh, I do, my dear—I do wish you joy of such a wonderful escape! I know you never looked at him or thought of him for a second in such a light. Who has such good reason to know that as I? But when I remember how I brought myself to regard the match as bearable for you, how could I do it? Iris, it is like a special interposition of Providence on your behalf.'

Iris drew back with a little shiver, and grew very pale. What if it had been no special Providence, but simply her doing? His words

were ringing in her ears—that she had sent him away from her with seven devils, instead of one, to bear him company.

Lucy entirely misinterpreted Iris's emotion. 'It is hard for you, at present, my love, for we all know Lady Fermor is rather a difficult person to deal with ; but though old people do not like to be thwarted in what they have set their hearts upon, they soon forget, and she will speedily recognise that you have been very fortunate, and will be thankful for it in her own way.'

'It is not that,' said Iris, twisting and untwisting her slim fingers ; 'it is not grand-mamma, though of course I am very sorry for having vexed her. But what if I drove him to it ? It seems a very vain thing for me to say,' added Iris, blushing deeply, 'but I believe he cared for me a great deal more than I deserve. He was terribly put out in the hay-field.'

'You could not help that, Iris,' said Lucy promptly.

'No, but all of you, unless your brother, speak of her as if she were some shameful creature whom you can hardly bring yourselves to mention. And I am afraid,' con-

tinued Iris, with her eyes growing moist and her lips quivering, 'when I first heard the story I did the same. I thought I was doubly disgraced by being brought into association with such a woman as Honor Smith. She was only a little less despicable than he was, because she did not know any better, and it did not appear to signify what became of her.'

'No, not that exactly,' denied Lucy.

'I had forgotten the forlorn child, the warm-hearted girl who used to bring me from her wanderings in the woods and the downs, anything she thought I might like, and was so pleased to have it to give to me,' said Iris piteously. 'Indeed, Lucy, though she had the misfortune not to be taught or confirmed—though she has not availed herself of the privilege of coming to church—though she is wild, she is not bad, apart from such lawlessness as her father and brothers may have taught her. Now what will become of her—of them both? Everybody will turn against them. She will be separated from the few friends of her own she has ever had, and if even he does not care for her, and they are both miserable, I am to blame for it all,' cried Iris, with her hazel eyes opening wide and her

lips falling apart in the extremity of her distress.

‘My dear child, you are a great deal too tender-hearted and scrupulous,’ Lucy told her decidedly. ‘It is no business of yours; you ought only to be thankful for your own escape.’

‘But I was never in any danger,’ persisted Iris, ‘and I am only one rescued to two ruined.’

‘Such a one to such a pair!’ Lucy exclaimed indignantly.

Iris’s next words sounded as if they were in answer to the scornful objection, though she had neither heard nor heeded it. ‘There is something fine in him. He is not mercenary. He has stood by his promise to his friend to drink nothing save water; and she—she is not wholly bad. Oh, far from that, when one thinks how she has been brought up. She might have had the making of a grand woman in her. And who made any of us to differ, Lucy, that we should condemn instead of being sorry for them?’

‘But they are not sorry for themselves, and it is their look-out,’ protested Lucy, with good-humoured impatience. ‘Leave them to take care of themselves and of each other. If there

be any good in them—I confess it is not very conspicuous to me—there is no reason why it should not come out. My dear, forgive me for laughing and scolding you a little, but I am so happy on your account. You will allow me to say you are a little fanciful, and draw too nice distinctions.’ Then Lucy in her turn grew serious and sententious. ‘Iris, how could you praise a girl who has been mixed up with poachers all her life, who can drink, and swear, and shoot—not that the last is a sin, I suppose, unless she shoots at game which is not her own, or at something else than hares and partridges—but it is so unwomanly and cruel. Lud talked some nonsense about her being a splendid wife for a traveller or settler, but that is because men think it necessary to praise courage and daring wherever they meet them—even King Lud falls into the affectation—while they don’t hesitate to prefer timidity and humility in any woman with whom they themselves have to do. Who prevented Honor Smith from being taught and confirmed, and from coming to church? I am certain she had every opportunity, but she chose to be a heathen. I dare say she will continue so after she is Lady Thwaite—a fine

example for her household! I don't know whether even the Bishop, dear old soul, could confirm her privately. Iris, how can you call her good?' .

'Everybody who is confirmed and comes to church is not good,' replied Iris, defending herself.

'Certainly not, but at least they put themselves in the way of becoming better. The last time I heard you speak of Sir William, when I was over at Lambford, you never hinted at reserves of nobility and virtue in his character. Nobility and virtue in a man who, after the company he has kept for the last five or six months, sinks himself and destroys his usefulness for the rest of his days by marrying the daughter of his under-keeper—a girl like Honor Smith! Don't preach the reverse to me. The man must always have had low tastes, which is not at all to be wondered at, and he had never got quit of them—you may spare yourself your self-reproaches. Depend upon it, he could never have really appreciated you or cared for you, though he might easily have admired you and felt some ambitious aspirations. There is no denying Lady Fermor led him on to fancy he might propose for you

and be accepted. But he consoled himself quickly with an unworthy consolation. Iris, I am surprised that you can find any pity to waste upon him. Take my advice and don't do it, dear; be wiser and harder-hearted, lest people, who do not know you, take it upon them to say you cared a little for him, and are disappointed by his horrid conduct.'

'I don't think you quite understand, Lucy,' said Iris, in a low, slightly hurt tone. She was not in a mood to mind what people said of her, but it pained her to find that her friend could not sympathize with her in her tenderest feelings. 'It is not that I think he need have cared much—that I am any great loss.'

'My darling, don't say that—I never thought so,' Lucy interrupted her affectionately. 'The loss of every hope of you, might well be the greatest earthly loss, all but enough for a man to break his heart about. For you know papa does not consider—and I agree with him—that a Christian ought to break his heart quite about any merely earthly good. But then this man has shamed himself, and shown that he was a world inferior to you, not capable of valuing you. I know you are not vain—the last girl in the world to be vain

—but I think you exaggerate unconsciously here. Perhaps you have been the least bit carried away by your first proposal, however unacceptable in the main. They say every girl is slightly *tête montée* on the occasion. I am biding my time. It will be a small comfort to me, if I have not even a chance of being anything save an old maid, that I shall have been delivered from the general *bouleversement*. If not, I shall look to you to sit upon me and set me right. Seriously, you are far too soft-hearted, and so you put weight on a few disappointed words from an angry man, who was doubtless not considerate or cautious enough to hide his mortification and annoyance. And it is still more like you to preserve a vivid recollection of what—forgive me, Iris!—was, I dare say, the designing visits and worthless gifts of a girl of Honor Smith's stamp.'

'She was not designing—of that I am certain, but very likely I am silly,' Iris ended the conversation with a sigh. She had to confess to herself ruefully that she was disappointed in Lucy's response to her confidence, though it might be no more than what was to be expected, when Lucy possessed only the

most superficial second-hand acquaintance with the chief features of the case.

The fact was that Lucy, on her part, wronged Iris more than she guessed, by the passing suspicion—could she, after all, feel mortified by the loss of Whitehills? Had she, like some girls, not been so honest in the rejection of her suitor as she had persuaded herself she was, so that the suddenness with which she found the suit withdrawn and herself superseded, nettled and vexed her?

However, Lucy had the grace to experience next moment a lively sense of contrition for having been tempted to pass such a judgment on her friend. It was incredible, on second thoughts, to one who was not herself mean and heartless, who had known Iris Compton all her life, that she could figure as a worldly-minded girl or as a vain coquette, capable of trifling with a man who had proved himself in every sense, except in the light of his title and property, immeasurably her inferior.

On the following day there was some calming down, except in one gentle heart and sensitive conscience, of the excitement over the great event of the week, which as far transcended the long-talked-of cotillon ball, or

the Whitehills hay-making, as a murder surpasses in grim interest a cricket-match or a flower-show. Lucy and Iris strolled together to a nook which they were pleased to call their own, in the overgrown Rectory shrubberies. These had the advantage over the somewhat run-out garden ground, that whereas neglect in the first tended to nothing worse than untrimmed luxuriance, in the second the same absence of attention to what was purely ornamental led to poverty of result in the flower-beds. But no one need mind having let well alone, by the sparing of the gardener's shears round the seat placed among the great box bushes, and among the laurels and plants which threatened to become gigantic. The view was confined to the inevitable pond, in which the Rectory boys had made an island, where there was an actual punt, in which the girls sometimes condescended to sit and be rowed, running aground every minute—not nearly so satisfactory a progress as that in a washing-tub on a mill-dam, King Lud alleged.

Iris was trying to enjoy, as she had been wont to do, a piece of work and a book with Lucy, feeling all the more bound to be happy, because hard-working Lucy was making an

hour and a half's leisure, on purpose to spend it in congenial pursuits with her friend. If only Iris could have got rid, on the first of the golden autumnal days, of that doleful burden of two lives wrecked inadvertently by her means. Lucy might tell her it was conceited to think so, but Iris could not cast off the impression. Poor Sir William! Poor Honor! Looking at their marriage in every light, Iris could not believe that there was any chance of its turning out well. He was going to marry Honor 'in a pet,' according to the mild popular interpretation of a man's having become mad with rage and despair. And Honor, what was she marrying Sir William for? A short triumph over her neighbours, a fit of false pride, a passing fancy? Could she ever have settled down, after the restless, exciting, sometimes lawless life she had spent from childhood, even so far as to comply with the primitive requirements of a labouring man's wife? And she was to be Lady Thwaite of Whitehills, joint head of a large household, the mistress of one of the oldest, best-considered houses in the county. If she turned to her husband for guidance and support, then it would be the blind leading

the blind. She would lean on a broken reed, which could hardly fail to pierce and wound her—mortally it might be, for she was a high-spirited, proud-tempered, passionate woman.

While the girls sat and worked and read, with the undercurrent of troubled dreaming on one side, Lady Thwaite, the coming dowager, had called at the Rectory. It was a P.P.C. call. She wished to see the girls, and preferred going out to them, to having them sent for to come in to her. Mrs. Acton accompanied her, and the group stood for a few minutes, talking idle nothings among the box and laurel bushes.

Then there was a summons for Mrs. Acton to return to the house, and she made a sign to Lucy to accompany her. 'Lady Thwaite has something to say to Iris, and we had better leave them to themselves,' the little woman said somewhat fussily to her daughter, when they were a few paces off.

Lady Thwaite suddenly stopped the well-bred nothings. 'Do you know what I am going to do, Iris?' she inquired directly.

'No,' said Iris, a little bewildered and alarmed. 'I thought there was nothing that could be done. What can you do?'

‘For him—nothing : but for myself, I hope, a good deal,’ answered the lady hastily. ‘I am starting to-morrow morning for Switzerland, where I shall pass the rest of the summer. In the autumn I shall either go to Italy or return as far as Paris, and spend the winter there.’

‘You have planned the trip since I saw you,’ remarked Iris awkwardly, not knowing very well what to say.

‘Of course. Should you have liked to have gone with me? But you would have been dreadfully hurried in your preparations. Besides, there would have been no use in proposing it, for I am convinced Lady Fermor would never have given her consent. She has quarrelled with the whole world, including myself, on account of Sir William’s insane behaviour. We are all alike in her black books, as if we would not—some of us at least—have done our very best to prevent the catastrophe.’

All the time Lady Thwaite was speaking, she was thinking to herself, ‘It is the nice thing to say to Iris Compton, and I might have been glad of her company in a way. Her French has not got the time to rust that

mine has had. But she has shown herself an impracticable girl. Above all, I might meet people who would know her name, and have heard of the Fermors. There might be revivals of scandal and unpleasant reminiscences. I have done my duty all my life, why am I to pay the penalty of other people's iniquities? She has been a fool for herself and others, and done a great deal of mischief all round, with her child's face and her goodness. I am not sure that she is not such an idiot as to repent, and, what is still worse, to show her repentance when it is too late, for she looks dreadfully distressed, and is changing colour every minute.'

But Iris had some spirit left. 'Thank you, Lady Thwaite, I should not like to go from home just now, even though grandmamma wished it. It would seem as if I were running away, either from something I had done, or from something that was going to happen,' she finished a little vaguely, but she held up her head, and there was a fine colour in her cheeks while she spoke.

'You are perfectly right. I am glad that you see it in that light,' said Lady Thwaite approvingly. 'The little gossip which mixes

your name with the affair will soon die out. I wish the misfortune might end there.'

'But is it not possible for everybody to live it down?' said Iris bravely. 'Must you go, Lady Thwaite?'

'Yes, indeed. I have had a long trip to the Continent in my mind ever since Sir John's death. I was only once abroad, and that was for my honeymoon. But Sir John caught cold the second week, and was not able for sight-seeing, and could not be induced to believe that he would be comfortable or could get well till he was at Whitehills again. Oh yes, I intended to go, but I did not imagine that I should be driven off in this fashion! I wish to goodness I had started at once for a change, and moved on as I felt inclined.'

'But could you not help them,' interposed Iris anxiously—'Sir William and his wife? they will have nobody to stand by them. You are connected with him; you have influence in society.'

'Iris Compton, have you lost your senses? what can you mean?' protested Lady Thwaite indignantly. 'It is bad enough to think of such a woman in my place. It is forcing me

away from my home and my friends, but for you to suggest that I should countenance her !

‘I don’t know why you all cry out so against her,’ burst from Iris. ‘It is not fair, and it is merciless. If she is wild she is not faster in her rank than Lord Eastham’s family have gloried in being in theirs. Maudie and Nanny Hollis have done as many things to make people stare, without a particle of the excuse that Honor Smith could plead. You have countenanced Sir William, yet one would have thought that harder to do.’

‘It was hard,’ said Lady Thwaite ruefully, ‘to acknowledge a rude lout in my husband’s and boy’s place, and to defer to him. But I did it ; nobody could say I failed. Oh, Iris, if you had played your part, how much harm and sorrow would have been spared !’

The reproach, however unmerited, fell in with Iris’s equally gratuitous compunction and stung her sharply, so sharply that it helped the inconsistency of human nature to reassert itself proudly.

‘How can you speak so to me, Lady Thwaite ? was I this man’s keeper ? He was something to you ; he could be nothing to me.’

‘Very well, Iris, let us drop the subject,’ said Lady Thwaite, continuing it all the same, while she composed her ruffled plumes. ‘It is true I have no call to blame you, but neither should you be so foolish and childish as to suggest that I ought to adopt this ill—or well-matched couple. The thing is not to be thought of for an instant. It would be improper—wrong. It was quite different in Sir William’s case. He came here a single man, and we might have made something of him amongst us all—we might have trimmed and polished him by judicious management. Don’t put up your lip, you little goose,’ Lady Thwaite was provoked to add, though she was no longer out of temper, and was speaking more in sorrow dashed with playfulness, than in anger. ‘You will know some day that men have to be managed for their own good, as well as for a quiet life and an honourable position, where women are concerned. But if I were to attempt to take this Honor Smith up, it would be for no good either to her or anyone else. A woman like her is beyond being subdued and cultivated.’

Lady Thwaite paused for a moment, and then began again : ‘Good heavens, Iris, what

could put it into your head to compare her to the Hollis girls and the Eastham family, aristocrats from their cradle, and so with *carte blanche* for eccentricity? But they always know where, to stop, and never risk their prestige. I should soon be let down and cut dead by all my set. I cannot afford that. What do you take me for, that I should fling away all the good things of this life—which are not so easy to get, to begin with, as a short-sighted girl fancies? And for whom should I make the sacrifice—a Sir William, a distant, unacknowledged kinsman of my late husband, and his low-born, ill-conditioned wife, with her doubtful reputation—however you may explain it away and defend her?’ Lady Thwaite was silent once more, and then finished with a touch of natural pathos, ‘If it had been my boy grown to be a man, and I had negotiated his marriage like a proud mother who would not have counted the best match in the country, or the most beautiful, amiable girl too good for her son; and if he had turned against me, against all his wisest advisers—though I cannot imagine it of Johnnie, supposing he had lived to become strong and grow a man—still, if he had chosen

the worst instead of the best match, I might have tried to make the most of it and risked something, or even lost all for him. But that is a mother's heart; no other heart can be like a mother's.'

Iris might have answered, none save the heart of that most perfect type of womanhood in which motherliness is the central human principle from the beginning. It may be seen in the little girl who 'mothers' in succession her doll, her kitten, her dog, her thoughtless schoolboy brother, her selfish grown-up sister, her exacting, unconscionable lover, her grumpy husband—until the long roll at last reaches her first bona-fide baby. It may be seen in the aged woman whose last conscious thought is to give others pleasure and save them trouble. But Iris remained silent.

'I shall not see you for some time, my dear girl,' said Lady Thwaite, in her most caressing tones; 'I hope—nay, I have not the slightest doubt—that any little misunderstanding or difference of opinion we may have had will be entirely forgotten before then. In the meantime, I shall look forward to our next meeting. We part friends, don't we, Iris?'

'Oh yes, we part friends,' answered Iris, a

little mechanically, and Lady Thwaite kissed and left her.

Iris clasped her hands and asked herself, 'Why cannot I believe her? She blames me, to be sure; but even she does not refuse to admit that I was free to act as I chose. Lucy—everybody agrees in that, unless grand-mamma, and I can make allowance for her liking for Sir William and her wish to get an establishment for me. Oh, I don't want an establishment; and it is most humiliating to have one sought out and planned for on my account. He did not think of things in that light. However unreasonable and unsuitable, he sought me for myself, and implored me to take him—not Whitehills. Has he got over it already? Is this that he has done getting over it, or will worse come of it, with two ungovernable, reckless spirits in collision—not in union? Lady Thwaite fears it, and so she has taken herself away not to be tortured or shocked by the tragedy.'

Iris set herself to brood on all the most horrible tragedies—the unhappy memories of which lingered in a remote, primitive county like Eastham. There were disappointed lovers who had shot themselves, dying with the stain

of their life-blood upon their hands. There were neglected ill-used women who had sought the oblivion of strong drink, or worked themselves into frenzied madness under the contemplation of their wrongs. There were hapless little children who grew up uncared-for and forlorn, bones of contention instead of links of love between their miserable fathers and mothers. And who was it that had first used the defence which Iris had made so glibly to Lady Thwaite? Cain, who slew his brother Abel. She must have dismissed Sir William, but could she not have done it so gently, with such humility instead of pride, with such sympathy and sorrow, that she would have retained him as her friend? She might have helped to win him to what was good and right, in place of sending him to his destruction.

One of poor Honor's grave offences, in the eyes of the Rector especially, was that she had not been in the habit of coming to church. But Sir William had always marched there, taken his seat in the Whitehills pew, and joined in the service according to military usage. From the first day that the banns were published, he marched Honor to church in his company, on the ground that they would

do nothing in the dark, and they were not ashamed of their purpose, which they were bringing to its legitimate issue. He did not ask her to sit with him in the Whitehills pew ; he descended the gallery stairs, and sat by her in one of the humble free seats near the door, which she had been wont to occupy on the rare occasions when she had been seen at church.

He did not enter any protest against her dress, possibly he did not notice it in the pitch of furious reaction and defiance which he had reached, though he knew that she had refused all gifts from him till she was his wife. Thus she wore nothing better than the least rusty of her black gowns, with one of her gaudy-coloured neckerchiefs, and the concession of a hat over her rough brown hair. In this guise she still appeared a handsome, striking-looking woman, and there was no denying that the discharged soldier and the poaching scoundrel's daughter formed a comely, stalwart couple.

The sensation which the pair excited was beyond what would have been produced by the entrance of the Queen and every member of the royal family into the country church, though Eastham was not behind other English

shires in loyalty. The Rector had difficulty in keeping his place and countenance, and reading with his usual solemn dramatic effect. If Lady Fermor had been in her pew she would almost certainly have spoken out her disapproval, to the scandal of the community ; but the old lady was absent, for which more than one person felt devoutly thankful.

Iris saw the two from the Rectory pew, and after one startled, wistful glance, in which she failed to meet the eye of either, a certain peace stole over her little face. They were all together in the house of God ; they were equal in His sight. Would not He make everything right and bring good out of evil ?

There was one person who ventured to greet the tabooed bride and bridegroom, from whom others separated themselves and scattered, as if the couple were uncanny, or carried about with them the seeds of a pestilence. The daring individual was, of all people, that modest fellow, King Lud. He went out of his way to intercept and address Sir William, a piece of attention which met with no encouragement from its object, and drew down censure upon the bestower.

‘My dear Ludovic,’ Mrs. Acton remonstrated

with her son afterwards, 'what could induce you to come prominently forward and speak to Sir William Thwaite to-day? You were not so intimate with him as to warrant that. It would have been no credit to you if you had been friends, but I believe you were on little more than speaking terms. This was such a conspicuous, unnecessary step on your part, my dear boy, and it looked—it really looked as if you were lending your countenance to a disgraceful proceeding which has grieved your father and me very much. It was affording a bad example on your part also, Ludovic.'

'My dear mother!'—Ludovic took the reprimand with perfect good-humour—'I could not cut the fellow as I saw other people do, because he was going to marry any woman in the world he chose to marry. But before you allow your serenity to be disturbed remember I have no countenance to lend. I am a poor beggar of a naval lieutenant, a complete nobody, except in your partial estimation. And as to a bad example, I hope I may never supply a worse. I must say, if the governor has no more evil deed than this to cut him up, he is uncommonly well off

which, I am willing to add in the most filial spirit, he deserves to be. King Cophetua may still marry the beggar-maid, I hope.'

Iris looked round at Ludovic Acton with eager pleasure, and she was so soft and kind to him for the next few days, that if ever there were danger of friendship passing into love this was the time.

Sir William Thwaite and Honor Smith were married, without more trouble, or without any demonstration of public dissatisfaction, on the day they had fixed. They went no marriage tour, but repaired to Whitehills, which was likely to afford them as entire retirement as they could desire or hope to procure elsewhere.

Iris Compton returned to Lambford about the same time. For some weeks her grandmother shunned her systematically, but, beyond the fact of the shunning, the only sign of Lady Fermor's displeasure was the angry light in her eyes and the snarling abruptness of her tones, when she was forced to speak to Iris. As the inevitable intercourse of daily life gradually relaxed Lady Fermor's avoidance of her grand-daughter, the old lady began to let out more of her feelings. But as yet it was no worse than the first scratches inflicted by

the envenomed talons, and Iris had known so little of the soft pats of the velvet paws which frequently precede such attacks, that she could bear them without outcry, only with a little inward moan.

CHAPTER XXII.

A RUDE IDYL.

By the time the names had been read for the third time, and the marriage of Sir William Thwaite celebrated, September and St. Partridge's day had arrived, which proved a boon to the newly-married couple, and a reprieve from that repenting at leisure which is apt to follow marrying in haste. The Thwaites were as solitary, though no doubt considerably safer, than any boycotted household in the wilds of Western Ireland. The very household at Whitehills had shrunk in the blight of the alliance which its master had formed. Mrs. Cray had fled from the first unmistakable tokens of the advent of such a mistress, with the odium which would attach to her innocent housekeeper. Mr. Cumberbatch, who knew a good place when he was in it, and had contracted a certain amount of attachment to

Sir William, in spite of his water-drinking and the great difference between him and the Dean, lingered on till—without any breach of honour on Cumberbatch's part, since Lady Thwaite generally spoke her asides in a louder voice even than Lady Fermor used—he heard his mistress allude to him as an old humbug and blockhead, and was directly addressed by her with primitive playfulness as 'White Choker' and 'Shiny Boots.' Neither freedom from control, nor time to himself, nor perquisites could atone for such gross liberties. So Cumberbatch too departed.

Bill Rogers, with considerable shyness and doubt of his powers on his part, was promoted to 'wait' in the butler's place. Whatever blunders he committed and erratic corrections he attempted, Sir William made no sign, and Lady Thwaite was satisfied. Bill did not care a straw where his own dignity was concerned, though Lady Thwaite, with whom, as Honor Smith, he had been acquainted in her early days, would call him 'Bill,' as she called her husband 'Will,' and stop him in his duties to recall some story of their old experience, or to tell him news of their common acquaintances. But however led on or laughed at by her, he

never would forget her title, or speak to her till she spoke to him, and he persisted in behaving to Sir William with double respect and deference.

Sir William, like Mr. Burchell, blurted out an equivalent for 'fudge!' and turned away, half in restlessness, half in pain, but the young groom was staunch in maintaining his tender discretion and faithful devotion.

Those of the womankind who had not given in their 'warnings' like a flock of sheep, after Mrs. Cray's great example, turned out sufficient for the contracting needs of the household. Lady Thwaite did not take much notice of them or interfere with them, and while they made a great many remarks upon her, she did not, somehow, come within their measurement. She inspired them with a mixture of wonder and awe, not altogether unlike what might have happened if she had been a great lady.

Honor Lady Thwaite's first impression of Whitehills, seen near at hand and familiarly, was slightly disparaging, as in the case of her husband when he was introduced to his place by Mr. Miles. Not even the library shook Lady Thwaite's conviction. It was not true

that she could neither read nor write, as had been said at the time of her marriage; but though she could spell through a line of print, and sign her name in rustic letters, *Belles Lettres* had not the smallest attraction for her.

‘What a great musty, poky hole! What an ‘orrid smell the leather of them books have! Why don’t you turn ‘em all out, and find room for ‘em in the garret, or kindle a bonfire ‘neath ‘em, Will? I’m certain nobody will ever open them mouldy boards.’

In the drawing-room, which the Dowager Lady Thwaite had lately envied, which Lady Fermor had contemplated with pride as that little fool Iris’s assured possession, of which Iris herself had owned the simple, stately charm, there was still in the new Lady Thwaite’s mind the same surprised contempt, not unmingled with exultation over those better things that the Squire’s wife had always enjoyed while she was but the unbroken-in daughter of a disreputable keeper.

‘My sakes! it is the hemptiest, dingiest place I ever seed for a room in a great house. Is this what you call a fine drawing-room?’ She pulled open the piano and banged the keys. ‘The birds in the Scrub do a heap

better than that without teaching or pay.' She walked up to one of the Sir Joshua's: 'What queer washed-out madam is that, with a muckrake fit for a child in her hand? She looks haythenish—she ain't dressed for her work.'

'Would you like some new stuff of furniture, Honor?' asked her husband, only the more willing to humour her, because she had come to him at his bidding as she stood. 'You know there's a balance at the banker's for us to get rid of.'

'Oh, speaking for myself, I ain't pertickler about furniture, as you can tell, lad; and what with the keep of father and the gifts you have insisted on sending to Ted and young Abe, we'll make a hole in the balance. But I've been thinking if any of my friends, my mother's folk, as have heard I'm a squire's lady, would care to come over, I'd not like to put them off with a faded, shabby place like this here for a drawing-room. They would expect to see something tasty and bright and rich. A cart-load or two of satins and velvets all the colours of the rainbow, might make a difference,' considered Honor reflectively. For such ideas as she had were sumptuous.

‘All right,’ acquiesced Sir William. ‘Write down or tell me what you want, and I’ll send the list to the first upholsterer in Birkett or Caversham.’

‘Better say Lon’on when you’re at it, and the man in the shop he can tell, a deal cleverer than me, what’s like to be wanted. You’ll just say fine furniture of all kinds for a seedy drawing-room.’

The roving order was given, and the transformation which Iris had once imagined as Sir William’s doing, became an accomplished fact. The upholsterer, quick to take a hint, made a considerable clearance of the older-fashioned stupendous lacquer and gorgeousness, together with all the hideous fantasticalness and incongruity which were yet to be found in his shop.

The fine, dainty old room at Whitehills became a brand-new, more expensive, and meretricious copy of the drawing-room at Lambford, and Sir William never put his foot in it if he could help it.

Lady Thwaite said this new state of things was more like the real article. But she did not really care for the grandeur she had evoked, and she could not put up with the

trouble of inhabiting several rooms when one or at most two would serve her. She fell back on a dull morning-room which had been converted into a smoking-room, where she said she and Will might be tolerably snug when they were by themselves and happened to be in the house. Bill Rogers might bring them their meals there without any to-do when they wanted them.

At first Lady Thwaite changed her black gowns for something she held to be more in keeping with the station to which she had risen. Her choice of dress was not happier than her selection of furniture. Stuffs, patterns, dressmakers were all fixed upon at haphazard, on no conceivable principle except that notion of sumptuousness which she had not been able to indulge hitherto, and the scrap of fondness for 'a high light' in a bit of brilliant colour, which had already existed in Honor Smith's red, orange, and sky-blue neckerchiefs. Imposed upon here also by the specious vendors of the wares, with her gaudy finery ill put on, and so badly treated that she never wore a gown three days without looking a full-blown slattern as well as an outrageous vulgarian, Lady Thwaite's dress offended

even her husband's half-dormant taste and eye.

Fortunately she soon grew tired also of her gay clothes, and found them highly inconvenient. She replaced them by adaptations in purples, bronze-browns, greens, and slate-colours, of her old rusty-black 'frocks' with the bright neckerchiefs in some silken stuff, as a relief to the prevailing sombreness of the attire. Thus clad she had the gratification to receive her husband's congratulations on looking more like her former self.

Old Abe occasionally invaded the honeymoon privacy of the young couple, but nobody else came, with one striking exception. Mrs. Hollis declared that she had visited so many squires' wives exactly alike that an entirely new variety ought to be refreshing, and it would be hard for her to miss the much-wanted refreshment. The present Lady Thwaite might prove a great acquisition in this way, and might be trotted out with the utmost benefit to her neighbours. Mrs. Hollis assured 'Peter,' truly enough, that the young woman had not been a bad character, only a little wild according to her station in life. Luckily for the peace of one corner of East-

ham, the Thwaites were literally not at home when Mrs. Hollis left her own and her husband's card for them. In return she had a singular scrawl written by Lady Thwaite on her own responsibility. She was much beholden to Madam Hollis for her bits of paste-board. In the meantime, during the shooting season, she and Sir William had not a moment to spare ; but later on, if they should be passing Thornbrake, they would look in.

Mrs. Hollis called the note delicious, showed it off to her Eastham relations, and exhibited it generally, but nothing came of it. Sir William and his lady were never at leisure, or they never happened to be passing Thornbrake.

One other visitor, a brave and gentle one in this case, would fain have entered the Whitehills gates again, held out the right hand of fellowship, and done what she could to bring order out of chaos. But Iris had no more power to refrain from abandoning the couple to their fate, than she had possessed power to use her hold on the gratitude of the girl Honor in order to win her to forsake 'the broad way and the green.'

That season's shooting at Whitehills was on

the whole a prolonged, innocent, healthy, and happy saturnalia. Honor went out every day with her husband and brought down as many birds as he did, though he had shot bigger animals. Old Abe was almost always in attendance, full of solemn importance and cunning delight. Waterpark, like the other higher functionaries at Whitehills, had thrown up his commission in disgust, when his thieving subordinate not only escaped all prospect of punishment, in addition his word threatened to demolish the decrees of the head-keeper. It was characteristic of Abe that though he boasted continually he was now free of every covert, water-meadow, turnip or stubble-field on the property, in the right of his daughter, and could fire his gun where and when he chose, and dispose of the products as he liked, at his own table or in the game-shops in the next town, he stole and snared, and helped others to poach of nights as much as ever.

Bill Rogers completed the party. No additional men were wanted for the dogs, guns, or game-bags. Abe and Honor knew the dogs and could control them. Each 'gun' carried his or her weapon and bag, seeking no relief, scouting the bare suggestion of it.

Honor pelted her husband with ridicule when he proposed to carry her gun and bag with his own. It was with some difficulty that the wilful woman was kept from constituting herself a beast of burden to the whole party by slinging all their bags round her neck, and piling their guns on her shoulder, in order to parade the strength of which she was proud. She had found or fancied that her battered straw hat interfered with her aim, and had replaced it sometimes by a cap of her husband's, sometimes by one of her gipsy handkerchiefs.

The whole party lunched, rather dined together afield, on the most free and easy terms, but for Bill Rogers, who would always be minding his manners. However, a meal *al fresco* is not like a meal within doors, and Sir William winced less often abroad than at home at words Lady Thwaite spoke, and acts she committed. Here it seemed no more than natural that she should loll against a tree-stem, or by a hedge, and smoke her pipe with the others ; for Honor possessed the accomplishment of smoking in its unvarnished form, unlike the fine ladies who nibble cigarettes, and ape, in what they are pleased to consider a

dainty fashion, the habits—not to say vices—of men. Poor Lady Thwaite was more honest; she smoked a short clay pipe coolly, in the frankest manner, exactly as men did for a physical solace after labour. The blue smoke curling from her full red lips, and rising above her brown face, as she sat with her head flung back or resting on her hand, perfectly at her ease, did not seem so out of place when the green earth was around her, and the fleecy clouds just tempering the sun in its zenith overhead.

The little party pursued their game till nightfall, and trudged home all dead-beat, still hale and cheery, content with their exploits, hopeful of what to-morrow held in its lap. It did not matter much whether the weather were good or bad to the hardy company that could face soaking wet, and defy the elements with marvellous equanimity.

Seen at a little distance, Sir William's shooting-party was unquestionably grotesque, and excited no end of sarcasm and laughter, yet it is doubtful whether any other shooting-party in the neighbourhood got as much pleasure out of their more civilized sport, and had as good a time of it.

Sometimes Sir William and Lady Thwaite varied their occupation by a day's fishing, but here, though she was still more his equal, and busked his flies and baited his line as well as her own, and softly stroked the water far more unweariedly, the close companionship proved less successful. The two were performing a duet, and the discordant notes, which would mar the harmony in the end, could be more plainly heard already. But it was Honor who taught Sir William to love his own woods and fields with a passionate fondness which would last to the day of his death.

It was an evil time for the husband and wife when even the last days of the pheasant-shooting waned, and the chill end of October gave place to a bleak November, which began with early black frosts that threatened to mar the prospects of the hunting-field. At their best they were to the Thwaites a poor substitute for the shooting. A meet and a run were a more open game, and could hardly be conducted in a homely family fashion. There were yeoman farmers in the field, no doubt, but the mass of the riders were Sir William's fellow-squires who, though they had not objected to his subscription to the hunt, now

showed generally as great a disposition to drop him, as they had ever displayed an inclination to take him up. Even if they had done otherwise, he would have resisted their overtures, for he had passed from neutrality in politics to bitter radicalism. But it was not pleasant to encounter old acquaintances and be dismissed with compassionate nods, or to see them turn their heads in other directions.

Sir William could ride, but Lady Thwaite could not. She had never been on an animal more dignified than a donkey in her life. The redoubtable champion of Amazonian feats on foot among the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, the fine figure of a woman walking in her half-gipsy guise, was reduced to helplessness and sat like a sack of corn in the saddle. She was not too proud to conquer her deficiencies, she had courage enough to surmount any difficulty, but she showed herself too impatient to learn slowly and surely. After one or two premature extraordinary appearances in the hunting-field, and 'spills' which made the M. F. H.'s hair stand on end, Sir William withdrew on his own account, and induced Honor to absent herself from the diversion of the season.

Lady Thwaite detested driving. She took half-a-dozen trials of her carriage, then said it made her sick. She had employed it in order to go to church in state. It served as a sorry excuse for abstaining from joining the assembly of her fellow-Christians which she had no mind to do, that she could not ride the distance. It went without saying that she could walk the distance half-a-dozen times any day, and would have indignantly rebutted the statement that she might suffer fatigue by the exertion.

With the falling leaves, the dank mists which are so conspicuous a feature of Eastham, and the shortening days, the newly-wedded pair found their open-air resources largely gone, and were driven within doors. It was as if the wailing utterances of the prophet were sounding afresh, 'The summer is past, the harvest is ended, and ye are not saved.'

Long before his marriage had left him undone, Sir William had awakened from his fit of rage and despair, as he had awakened many a time from the madness of drink, to be sensible that Honor Smith was no wife for him. He knew that he had better cut off his right

hand or pluck out his right eye than wed her, that such wedlock would certainly be his, probably her ruin.

But he had also said to himself that it was too late to repent, that he could not leave a woman who had trusted him in the lurch, that they must go on and take their chance, and God have mercy upon them both.

It was incredible at first, besides being extremely vexatious and humiliating to Sir William, to find that in so short a time he had acquired something of the tone of the class he had renounced and detested, and saw no reason why he should not continue to detest, in spite of the fact that so many of Honor's words and deeds stood out in antagonism to his better self and plagued him. He did his best to hide the unwished-for acquisition and crush it out of him, but it rose from its ashes and forced him to own that, be his principles what they might, he could never be again what he had been, before he entered on his inheritance, and moved for a brief space on terms of equality in more intelligent and cultivated circles. He might be that monstrous anomaly, a stuck gentleman—neither one thing nor another, disowned by both classes,

that in which he had been born and brought up, and that into which he had been for the shortest time adopted. He might be a social outcast, doubly repudiated, but he could not return to his original obscurity and live and die the common working-man he had started in life, with his great succession no better than a wild dream.

His reading had included considerable dabbling in the great dramatist whose breadth and strength meet all wants, whose work, next to the Bible, is fit to unite all English classes, and is, if possible, more acceptable and enthralling to the intelligent mechanic than to the dilettante scholar. Sir William had read of Christopher Sly and the trick which the merry and not too scrupulous duke played upon the dupe. Often Christopher Sly rose before Sir William's mind, and he compared himself to the man. He questioned whether the drunken dog ever recovered from the dazzling, enervating illusion of the imposition practised upon him.

When Sir William went back to his books, to tide over the dull, dark, winter days, he tried to take Honor with him. He would read to her what she might care to hear, as he

had read the 'Racing Calendar' and the details of the last murder to old Lady Fermor.

But Honor could not abide books, whatever the subject. The very sight of print was disagreeable to her. She would not have listened even could Sir William have hit on registers recording the experience of mighty hunters and great sportsmen, or the nature-in-art of the word-painters of the woods and fields, with their teeming life, in which she had lived. She cared for the things themselves, but not for the finest reflections of them. The bare obstacles of his measured voice, and a style of expression less homely than she had been accustomed to, would have been enough to deprive her of all sympathy with the reader.

Lady Thwaite could hardly work unless in the coarsest make-shift for sewing, and she hated such woman's work next to listening to sermons, with which she always confounded listening to reading.

She moped and wandered about restlessly and aimlessly, went constantly to her father's at Hawley Scrub, at the most ill-timed seasons, and took to visiting her mother's kindred at the Quarries to pass the time.

Sir William began by accommodating him-

self to his wife's wild habits, for a longer time than could have been looked for from him. He had never shirked acknowledging his father-in-law or even his connections by marriage at the Quarries. What had he been that he should treat the roughest fellows as his inferiors, or behave as if he were ashamed to be seen in their company? He went with Lady Thwaite both in broad day and under cloud of night, when the fancy took her, to Hawley Scrub. He showed no provocation; which was, doubtless, because he cared too little for his privileges, on seeing, as he could not fail to see, that old Abe's ways were unchanged. Lady Thwaite was more aggrieved than Sir William, and went so far as to rate her father soundly for trenching on 'the rights of things.' 'These birds and hares are Will's and mine, father. You are welcome to a share—your share of them, but you ought to be content with that. It ain't serving us fair to make them public property, or to put them away on the sly to fill your pocket when you've everything you could wish and nought stinted to you, and Will do have come down handsome to the boys.' At other times she took the matter as an excellent joke, and

laughed long and loud at the contradiction. For Abe himself, he was always complacent, cunning, and a trifle cringing.

Neither did Sir William decline to accompany his wife to the Quarries, or to be present when the Quarry gossips, men and women, came to Whitehills, to join in the family meals, marvel at the splendour of Honor's drawing-room, and soil its flaunting finery with their hob-nailed boots and smutty or greasy fingers. Sir William had returned to the ranks of the people, and he must accept his natural associates. So far as they were concerned, any momentary sense of feeling abashed, by finding themselves among surroundings so different from their own, vanished rapidly before their engrained brainless effrontery.

It was in connection with the Quarry folk that the smouldering discord in the situation took shape, and threatened to burst into a blaze. These natives of Eastham were a specially uncouth, violent, debauched set of people. They had no modesty, else they would have held back a little even from Lady Thwaite's boisterous, lavish invitations, and Sir William's grave endorsement of the same. The Quarry men and women had no respect

for themselves or for others, otherwise they would have let the master of the house alone in his peculiarities, and would not have taken offence at his sobriety, with the comparative quietness and reasonableness it lent to his behaviour. He did not impose the restraint he put on himself on any of them. He did not even restrict the mistress of the house, when knowing what her guests liked best—what, if conspicuous by its absence, would render a feast flat, flavourless, and unendurable to their disorganized natures and morbid cravings—she caused ale and gin, rum and brandy to flow freely. The mirth grew fast and furious in consequence, the talkers shouted, quarrelled, and had occasionally to be dragged asunder, as they were about to close in hand-to-hand fights. Never had Whitehills seen grosser orgies, even in the drunken days of the Restoration, or the rude revels of Mediæval times. But Sir William was well enough acquainted with such scenes, though he had never before known how brutal and sickening they could present themselves to a sane on-looker, who endured them while he sought to keep the peace.

Nevertheless the detachments of quarrymen

were by no means satisfied with being left to follow their debased inclinations in putting an enemy into their mouths to steal away their brains, and so suffered to degrade themselves into raging, insensate beasts. They felt affronted with their host or guest, as it might be, spoiling all true fellowship by not affording a good example in drinking deeply and steadily. They were secretly enraged with the man and inclined to vow vengeance upon him, when, with his conscience tormenting him and all the higher qualities he possessed reproaching him, he still doggedly indulged them to the top of their bent.

The women—the greatest gadders from house to house, the biggest scolds, the most ragged slatterns, and in self-defence, perhaps, the most frequent drunkards of all the working women far and near—turned, too, upon the man who, though he had a whole cellar full of drink at his disposal, was not enticing their men, by his abuse of it, to spend their children's bread in the ale-house. What business had Honor Smith with a husband who was not only a titled squire and had made her Lady Thwaite, but who could not take a glass like his neighbours? For a young unmarried

woman, she had not been so far behind her matronly friends. It was not one glass or two either that would go to Honor's head ; she need not try to make a fool of them by coming over them with a pretence of growing proper all of a sudden.

It would have been the last thought which would have entered Lady Thwaite's mind to pretend to be other than the wild reckless woman she was. She did not require the goading and taunting which met her on all sides from her coarse, stupid, envious cronies, to display herself in her worst colours, to defy all implied opposition, including her husband's.

If these riotous tempters had known it, they had a powerful ally in Lady Thwaite's breast. She was not dull as they were ; she was not book-learned, but she had plenty of mother-wit, as well as an overweening pride and a passionate temper. She had been accustomed, in the days which seemed far off now, when she had sprung up from a neglected little girl into a strong, capable woman, to be a person of importance in her family and circle. She had not thought often of Sir William's condescending to her, from the evening of the

hay-making. Since he had told her his story, her thought had been to stand by him and atone to him for the injustice which had been done to him, and the burden thrust upon him of having to put up with fine folk who were not of his kind. Her heart had grown soft to him; she had been very happy in those September and October days in the woods and fields.

But for that very reason Honor had been quick to detect the slightest sign of what she must regard as recantation and rue on his side. She had been galled by the faintest token of disapprobation and disappointment from her husband. In place of seeking to submit to his judgment and to suit herself to his tastes, she flourished her independence and opposition in his face and in the faces of her friends.

He remonstrated with a reservation, because he knew in his heart what she suspected, while the suspicion was driving her mad, that he had no true love and fond admiration for her in his heart, such as might have caused him to overlook her faults, or to win her from them, by patient devotion. Her conduct was offending and incensing him, and

the more he grew offended and incensed the more contumacious and audacious she became.

The couple took to going their different ways; rather Sir William sulked and sat alone in his topsy-turvy, disorderly house of White-hills, while Lady Thwaite roamed abroad and pursued her vagaries wherever the vagabond impulse of the moment drove her. The result was that she was from home at all hours, and was frequently to be found in any company to which he had an objection. When called in question for her behaviour, she either asserted her right to do as she chose, or lied and made a feint of deceiving her husband. But she did the last with so brazen a face and so carelessly, that it looked and sounded as if she either told falsehoods and cheated for the mere pleasure of the thing, or sought to put a fresh insult on Sir William.

The roar and surge of domestic discord rising and swelling filled the ears of the principals in the strife, even of the minor performers in the household contest, so that they could not distinguish the loud, vehement condemnation of the world without.

Old Abe remonstrated anxiously: 'Lass, what are you about? Be you going to spoil

your luck and waste your fine fortune? Is there an evil spirit in you? No man born will long stand the treatment you are giving her. I have seed a man take a stick or a poker to his wife, and break her head or go nigh to brain her, for a deal less.'

'Never mind, father; Sir William will not break my head or brain me. I can take care of myself, and I'll do what I like. Maybe there is a devil in me—leastways I'll not stand his cold looks and sour fault-findings. Who axed him to leave the fine cattle he consorted with? Let him go back to them, if he will have them and their ways.'

The crisis could not be long deferred, when a house only built the other day was already shaking to its sandy foundation.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BEAST WALLOWS IN THE MIRE.

LADY THWAITE's last transgression had been to walk over to Hawley Scrub, before the wintry daybreak, to meet and warn a brother of the dead Hughie Guild's, whom even the shuffling Abe did not countenance, and whom Sir William had been roused to threaten he would hunt out of his plantations and bring before the justices.

Hughie Guild had perished in his comparatively innocent youth, or he might have been the best of his race—anyhow the remaining Guilds were well known to be the worst livers in the parish; women as well as men of them were abandoned to shameless vice. It was only lately that Lady Thwaite had renewed her acquaintance with the Guilds, and Sir William had sworn she should not enter their house, or he would know what to do.

Lady Thwaite, after she had got Zacchary Guild out of danger, denied that she had been near the Guilds' house, and announced her intention of visiting her most intimate friend at the Quarries, where Sir William no longer offered to accompany her.

In Honor's refuge she was plied with jeers and sneers at Sir William as a pattern-card, a great hulking reformed water-drinker, and she was taunted with her subjection to him.

She defended him hotly for a time :

' You are not to say ill of my man Sir William. He's a deal too good for you and the likes of you. You are not fit, the best of you, to hold a candle to him. He have come of gentlefolks, and he was hand and glove with gentlefolks so long as he chose, but he liked his freedom and he liked me.'

She did not care that anybody should blame him save herself ; she only changed her tone when some persons hinted broadly that he must have altered his mind, and could not think very much of her after all. She was to be pitied, with a husband at once a squire, and not a roystering squire, but a nonsuch. As for the speakers, whatever their men were

—poor quarrymen, never out of the ale-house
—at least they were no better than their wives,
and could not indulge in despising them.

Honor cried out she was as good as Will Thwaite any day, she was no man's slave; and she began to drink and shout, gossip and sing snatches of songs. When she returned to Whitehills it was with an unsteady step, a blazing face, and clouded eyes.

Sir William sat waiting for her in the comfortable room, without the vestige of a woman's presence in it—not a bit of darning, or an ironing blanket, or a screen hung over with white clothes, such as had marked his sister Jen's home. He had discovered by this time that though Honor had not been at the Guilds' house, she had gone out at break of day to keep an appointment with the scoundrel Zacchary Guild.

The husband was at his post in a white heat of fury, meaning to charge her with a violation of all duty to him, and utter disregard of his credit and her own. But the sight of her, as she stumbled into the room, gazed at him with half-blank eyes, and broke into senseless laughter, stopped him. He stared at her in return with such a look of wild

despair as to penetrate even her dazed faculties ; then she made some foolish excuse and left him.

When Sir William Thwaite was by himself he clenched his fists and rose to his feet, quivering with passion.

‘It is all over,’ he said aloud ; ‘peace and credit are both done for. I did not mean it when I said I would return to the ranks of working-men ; and when I married that woman I thought she was true as steel, and would help to keep me true to myself and her. But I have seen it coming, and now there is not a grain of hope left. If you were here, Jen, you would release me from my word, and pray to God to forgive me. For now, as I am a sinner and mated to a sinner, there is nought remaining to me but to drown care, and drink myself blind and deaf and dead to what I have made of my life.’

He staggered to the door as if he were drunk already, went out into the darkness, walked to the nearest ale-house, which was shut up for the night, and thundered at the door there till the amazed and alarmed landlord granted him admittance. Then, against law and gospel and Will Thwaite’s word to his

dead sister, he sat pouring out and emptying glass after glass of fiery spirits faster than he had ever done in his wild youth, till he was past thinking, past feeling.

Before the week was over the hue and cry rose that Sir William Thwaite, who had disappeared from church and market, was never out of one ale-house or another; that he was drinking himself into a lunatic asylum or the grave, in the lowest company; that he had become a common brawler, with whom the police would soon be compelled to interfere. This was what had come of his not being able to drink his glass of port like a Christian gentleman and Squire. Many people had pointed out what such unbecoming extravagant abstinence portended, what had been its origin and what would be its end. It was but an interlude between a drunken scamp's fits of debauchery. After the low marriage he had tumbled into, what further chance was there of his keeping his pledge, or promise, or whatever it might be?

Lady Thwaite was subdued for a time.

'What's come over you, Will?' she asked almost timidly—'you who would not taste drink, to take to it all of a sudden, and like

a fish. But you needn't go to them ale-houses and taverns where you are a marked man. Have your liquor here, where nobody has any right to forbid you, and you'll have nobody to quarrel with in your cups.'

'What! you don't think I should quarrel with you, my lady, not though we were two at a trade?' he said savagely. 'Ah, you don't know me yet. Besides, I prefer taking my sprees on my own account, and not at home. We have not pulled so well together of late that we should risk keeping company when wit is out. I am not come to the lowest pass that I should sit in my own house of Whitehills—the old Thwaites' house, confound them, and drink in company with my wife till we quarrel, and fight, and agree again like the vilest wretches in the barracks.'

'It was only once, Will,' she said with strange humility for her. 'Did you ever hear of me or know me as a drunken drab—am I like it?'

But he broke away from her, and she desisted from all further expostulation with him. Nay, in place of seeking to reclaim and restrain him, it appeared as if she were

thenceforth set on goading him on and exasperating him to the utmost pitch. She pursued her own course not only without hesitation, she threw herself in his way, crossed his path, and defied him when he was more like a mad animal than a sane human creature.

But Sir William was not left altogether undefended and uncared for. Go when and where he liked, to ale-house or tavern, when he stumbled out of it, he never failed to find one faithful friend, whether the miserable fellow knew it or not. Bill Rogers was a sober lad, though he could indulge at a time in a single glass or a couple of glasses ; but nothing on earth would induce him to drink with his master. He turned away his eyes from Sir William's debasement. He never spoke of it voluntarily. When assailed with gibes and mockery, he said stoutly and loyally all that could be urged in defence of a lapsed sinner. Bill was constantly hovering shamefacedly in Sir William's neighbourhood, ready to offer him his servant's arm if the Squire would accept it, wary to follow and keep him in sight, if he waxed furious at being what he called tracked and

spied upon, to prevent his slipping into pond or ditch, or lying down in the frost or the wet, on the withered or sodden grass, and dying a dog's death.

It was in vain that Sir William stormed and threatened :

'Do you think I wish you to be ruined as fast and sure as myself, Bill? Ain't you a precious sight better chap than your master? Don't he know it to his cost? But he ain't such a selfish brute as to wish you to pay the piper, and to have your destruction to answer for, in addition to his own and that of a few more fools. Come along, Bill Rogers, and I'll stand you a treat. We'll swallow something hot and strong. I'll tip you an old soldier's song, and we'll have a rare blow-out, and make a night of it. No, you won't? Then I'll be hanged if you shall play the flying scout at my expense. I give you your leave, lad, from this day, with a month's wages. Who sends you on your dashed prying errands at my heels? Not Honor? Much right she has to meddle. Or is it somebody else whose name I'll never speak again with my polluted lips? She was an angel, Bill; but she wrought my

undoing. No, no. That is false as the place I'm bound for. She was as innocent as the babe unborn, only she could not touch pitch and be defiled. It was I who was the beast I have always been.'

One day about this time, Sir William was walking down the middle of Knotley High Street, as if challenging any man to say his gait was disorderly, and his dress slovenly, when he felt a clap on his shoulder.

'Hallo! Thwaite,' cried the insolent voice of Major Pollock. 'I hear you have come out of your shell, slipped your cable or your moorings, or what shall we call it? since I saw you last. My dear fellow, I like you a thousand times better for it. I have only one crow to pluck with you. Why will you descend to the gutter, and not go to the bad in good company—that of gentlemen like your—ahem! forefathers? I assure you that you would find it more agreeable, if you would only try us, and we should make you heartily welcome. Come to my den and have a game at billiards and a glass of beer or grog, if wine don't suit your stomach.'

But Sir William shook him off.

‘I’ll see you far enough first, Major Pollock. If I’m going to destruction, and I ain’t the one to deny it, it shall be with humble folk, who are as low as I ever was; it shan’t be for the entertainment and profit of them that calls themselves gentlemen. Whatever I am or may sink to, me and my mates don’t care to earn a penny, with our tongues in our cheeks, from our neighbour’s sin and shame.’

There was another incident in Sir William Thwaite’s history which belonged to this period. Parliament was dissolved, and a general election ensued, bringing political agents and men from a distance, to town and burgh, to contest interests keenly, and canvass hotly for votes in houses which the visitors would not otherwise have entered. By one of those singular chances, which happen at least as frequently in real life as in novels, Will Thwaite’s old commanding officer, Colonel Bell, who had returned from India, was nearly related to one of the candidates for the favour of this section of Eastham, and came down with him to Knotley to help his cause.

In examining the lists of voters, the name of Sir William Thwaite, of Whitehills, soon

turned up. Colonel Bell immediately recognised it, and, upon a few inquiries, found that the later career of the young man had been very much what might have been expected from certain early passages in his life.

The officer hinted his acquaintance with the Baronet in his chrysalis condition. Colonel Bell went on to admit that the news of Sir William's accession to the title and estate had reached the soldier through the speaker, that, in fact, he was the Colonel who had given Sir William Thwaite his discharge from her Majesty's service. But being the soul of honour, and a man who did not care to present himself in an undignified light, the gentleman kept to himself the offence and the impending punishment which had immediately preceded the discharge. The inevitable result of his reticence was that he found himself pressed to accompany the candidate, and use the officer's supposed influence with Sir William, who was understood to be indifferent to politics, to vote for the right man.

Colonel Bell yielded against his judgment to the pressure put upon him, and drove in a carriage full of ardent electors, who would take no refusal, to Whitehills.

The visitors experienced more regret for the deterioration of the fine old place than for the degradation of the new Squire. There were traces of changed days as the party drew near the house. Of course, when it came to that, Sir William's dissipation had been of a cheap and mean order compared to that of some of his predecessors. He had still an ample supply of ready money to squander and work mischief with; none of the grand old trees had been felled, the park had not been used for grazing purposes, and sufficient time had not elapsed for very conspicuous signs of downfall in other respects. No gate was off its hinges, no fence was full of holes, no path positively overgrown. But the exquisite dainty trimness of an English gentleman's place, which had been conspicuous in the late Sir John's day, was wanting. What nobody looked for or heeded under the present *régime* was no longer supplied by the diminished staff of servants. Weeds were cropping up, borders left ragged, branches broken and untrimmed. Some cottages which the young Squire had begun to build, in which he had taken an interest, stood half built, as the masons had left them on the first of the winter

frosts. In the meantime the builder had come to grief, and failed to fulfil his contract. But no fresh contract had been entered into, and the uncompleted houses, like unfulfilled promises, appealed mournfully to the passer-by. There had been an old-fashioned lamp, since the days of links and their extinguishers, which, though seldom used, was left to hang in its place above the principal gate it was supposed to grace. Its thick, dim glass had been smashed recently, and remained in a few jagged fragments in the metal framework. A baker's van, which ought to have been taken round to the back of the house, had boldly driven up to the front entrance and stopped the way, as if there were no chance of a dispute with a vehicle of higher estate. The thin wedge of neglect and aggression was introduced, and the rest would follow, until the house became as great a wreck as its master.

Lady Thwaite was abroad, as usual, and, if she returned in time, did not show her face amidst the tawdry splendour of her drawing-room.

Colonel Bell did not think the haggard-faced man in the rumpled, mud-bespattered clothes, in which he might have slept for a

week, who reluctantly came in answer to their summons, was an improvement on his young sergeant. The latter, in spite of his fits of excess, had been wont to turn out on parade scrupulously neat and smart, as became a gallant soldier.

‘How are you, Thwaite? You see I have looked you up when I am in the country,’ stammered Colonel Bell a little nervously. ‘I have come to ask a favour from you in renewing our acquaintance. Will you, if you have no objection, lend your support to my friend on the hustings and at the polling-booth next week?’

Sir William did not take the hand held out. He stood still, and glared with his blood-shot eyes at the speaker.

‘It wasn’t I who ever asked any favour of you, Colonel Bell, that you should seek a return from me,’ he said, in a thick, altered voice. ‘You have forgotten, sir, or your wits are wool-gathering. It was my poor sister Jen. Do you remember her, or was she too humble a lot to stick in your memory? I was told that she went down on her marrow-bones to you, though she was a proud woman in her way, was Jen, if you had knowed it;

but you pushed her away, and said discipline could not be set aside, not though a woman's heart were to break—as hers was broken by that date—or a young rascal be doomed to the gallows, since there was nothing else he could hope for after that morning's work.'

He stopped speaking to a dumbfounded company, while Colonel Bell, with a face as red as fire, or his old mufti, muttered :

'I thought it had been made up, and the past forgotten,' and began to back to the door.

But Sir William arrested him. 'When it comes to that, you did your duty, old Bell—we're meeting as equals to-day, ain't we?—which is more than I ever did. I can't ask you or your friends to eat or drink with me, for though we're social equals, you and I know that would not be fitting. But you're welcome to my vote, though, bless you! my presence on the hustings would be no credit to your man. I can slink up with the ruck to the booth, and give you what Jen herself, had she been here and a voter, would have given you freely, man. For though you were hard, we always held you honest; and though you helped to do for me, that's neither here nor there. I was going to the dogs anyway,

and would have reached them in the long-run without your aid, I take it. I have that faith in you and your choice that I believe it will be the country's own fault—as it was mine—if it don't do as well as it deserves under the rule of the likes of you, old Bell !

‘What a strange character !’ ‘Who was Jen ?’ ‘What on earth had you to do with him besides giving him his discharge, Colonel ?’ ‘At least we've got his vote, which was what we wanted,’ was chorused round the officer when the party had reached their carriage.

‘Yes, yes, you've got his vote, and I really believe you've me to thank for it,’ said the Colonel, wiping his forehead ; ‘but I'll be shot if I undertake such another encounter on your account, Charlie. That fellow Thwaite must have been as mad as a hatter from the beginning. Scrapes ? oh ! of course ; a fellow like him was safe to be in a thousand scrapes.’

Some of the stories with which the country was ringing reached Lady Fermor. Then she assailed her grand-daughter in the privacy of the old lady's dressing-room. ‘Have you heard the news, Iris ? Sir William Thwaite has broken out, and sits drinking himself to death with carters, and quarrymen, and tramps,

for anything I can tell.' The speaker fixed her hollow, gleaming eyes on Iris's face, and spoke with deliberate calmness. 'He and his beggar-wife are at daggers-drawing, so it is feared murder may be committed and somebody hung for it. What do you think of that for your work, girl? We have all got our sins to answer for, but I should say that was something to have on one's conscience.'

'It is not my work, and it need not lie heavy on my conscience,' protested Iris, with her whitening face. But though she knew she spoke the truth, and would not be silent because she was not afraid to maintain her innocence in such hearing, when she got to her room she shed bitter tears. 'Grand-mamma accuses me, and Lucy bids me rejoice in having escaped such a miserable fate; and I—what can I do but cry to God to have mercy on His lost sheep—His lost children?'

CHAPTER XXIV.

LADY THWAITE'S LAST PRANK.

SPRING had come, with violets and daffodils adorning the anniversary of the time when Sir William Thwaite had taken possession of Whitehills.

Iris Compton had been spending the morning with Lucy Acton at the Rectory, had remained to luncheon, and was walking back alone to Lambford. She had always been fond of country walks, like most healthy, happy English girls, but after she had grown up Lady Fermor laid certain restrictions on her grand-daughter. Unless when she had Lucy Acton or some other companion with her, Iris must be content to confine her expeditions to the park, or the Lambford woods, or the home farm.

Latterly Iris had been only too willing to comply with the obligation. The truth was

she had an almost morbid terror of meeting Sir William or Lady Thwaite, as she heard of them now, when they had become the scandals of the parish. 'I should feel as if I must die of shame if I saw him as they say he is often to be seen now. And what if she were to come up and speak to me? I could not refuse to answer, and what should I say?'

This day was an exception to Iris's usual habits, for Lucy Acton had been unexpectedly prevented from bearing her friend company on the road between the Rectory and Lambford. However, the way did not lead past any of the Whitehills gates, as the road from Knotley did, and the afternoon was perhaps the least likely time for awkward encounters. Still Iris increased her pace in the slight spring mist which was beginning to descend upon the pastures, with their daisies and marsh-marigolds, their colts and lambs. But though the mist might strike human beings as lending a touch of dimness and sadness to the spring landscape, it did not so much as subdue the larks carolling in the hazy air, or the rooks hovering over the equally hazy earth.

Iris started a little, scolding herself for her folly, when she saw a man's figure turn the

corner of the hedgerow — on which, as in autumn, thousands of floating gossamers were softening the sharp outlines of the boughs that were no longer of an earth-brown or ashen-grey tint, but had the faintest blush of bluish-plum colour marking where the sap was stirring and swelling, and sending out the first buds. The man was walking steadily along on his proper business, no doubt. He was a biggish fellow, young and active by his gait, carrying nothing save a whip in his hand, with which he was carelessly cutting at the hedge. As he drew near Iris, she recognised that he was a groom from some of the neighbouring country houses, apparently going an errand on foot.

Iris did not look at the man again till he left the footpath to make way for her. Then some intangible peculiarity in the air and gait of the young man in buskins, with the dark frock-coat and the cockade on his hat, caused her to look up suddenly in his face, while her heart began to throb violently.

The man was seeking to push past Iris, while at the same time he pulled out a handkerchief, and buried his face in it, as if in preparation for a sneeze or cough. The move-

ment did not conceal the poppy-red which rose and burnt through the brown skin of the cheeks up to the rim of the hat, or stifle a noise of sobbing, or giggling, or both, that had become audible.

Iris had not a moment left to think that one of the meetings she had dreaded had come to pass, but so oddly and incomprehensibly that natural instinct got the victory. She caught the retreating figure by the arm and clutched it. If the person thus stopped had exerted any force, the interruption could have easily been brought to an end; but something stayed the strong, rough arm, and after the slightest struggle its owner stood motionless, while Iris cried out in her trouble:

‘Honor! Lady Thwaite! why are you in this absurd dress? What are you going to do? Surely this is the height of indiscretion.’

‘What do it matter to you how I dress, Miss Compton?’ Honor tried to answer with hard defiance. ‘You ain’t a friend of mine. You would not own me or come nigh me. What does it signify to you whether I’m mad or not? Let me go.’

‘No; since we have met, not till you tell

me where you are going in this outrageous guise ; whether Sir William—your husband knows,' gasped Iris.

'What business have you or any other woman to come atween me and my husband ? to seek to know our affairs ? No, miss ; I'm obliged to you for desiring to satisfy your curiosity, but if you don't take off your hand I'll be forced to free myself, and I don't want to hurt you.'

'I know you don't,' said Iris, pressing close to the desperate woman, instead of drawing away from her. 'You were fond of me, long ago. We were both fond of each other, if we had been suffered to grow up friends. You came to me with your little presents—I was thinking of one last night, bunches of dry sea-grapes, that I might put them into my fire and hear them go off like a succession of small shots—don't you remember ? They were all given for such a little service. I, a child, was amazed at your generosity. Oh ! Lady Thwaite, it is not curiosity—it is not even a spirit of interference ; but, indeed, you don't know, you can't guess, what people will think and say if they see you like this.'

'I don't care what they say ; let 'em. I

am sorry—a little—that you should think bad of me, but for the rest of the world they may think and say what they please,’ said Honor scornfully, in spite of a little softening to begin with, as she switched the hedge with the whip in her disengaged hand.

‘But Sir William will care. Men—the best of them—cannot stand harm said of the women who are near and dear to them,’ pled Iris.

‘You seem to know,’ said Lady Thwaite, taking refuge in insolence, and tossing her head till she had nearly lost her chimney-pot hat. ‘But I’ve always said I ain’t any man’s slave, and what is more, I ain’t going to be. I don’t believe he minds ; and what right have he to meddle when I don’t set eyes upon him for nigh a week at a time, because he is living in one ale-house or another, sitting swilling ale or brandy with all the low raff he can find to drink with him at his expense, making a sot of hisself worse than a brute beast ? What do you think of that, Miss Compton, in a man as boasted of your acquaintance once on a day ?’

‘I think it is the saddest, most terrible story I have ever known,’ said Iris, with a

shudder and eyes full of grief and horror. 'But will it mend the wrong for you to be so reckless?'

'I ain't doing anything so far amiss,' asserted Lady Thwaite sullenly; 'I have only helped myself to Bill Rogers's best suit for a change and a bit of a lark in my dull life. Being a lady, even when a woman can do as she likes, and ain't yoked to a gentleman, or bothered by gentlefolks' notice, don't turn out the fun it promised. Life at Hawley Scrub were a deal livelier and fuller of things happening. Bill won't heed my making free with his clothes—even his best groom's suit; he ain't an unfriendly chap, except that he's stuck up with solemn notions of duty, and full of starch of manners, and nonsense. If it had been anybody save you, miss, I would have challenged him or her to deny that I set off a groom's livery,' insisted Lady Thwaite, with a jaunty pose of her fine figure and handsome face. 'I'm cock-sure you never would have knowed me from a man, if summat had not possessed you to stare right into my face. It ain't the first time I've guised in men's clothes, though I did it for a purpose then, and I did not try it on in broad

daylight before. Women has done it sometimes, Miss Compton, you know, and run off to sea or to the wars before the trick was discovered ; but there ain't no such luck in store for me, and this ain't the right rig, or a very good fit neither. Bill ain't my build, I'm nearer Will's.'

She stopped abruptly. She had been running on in flippant chatter, while Iris stood looking at her in piteous wonder. Now when the truant turned her head aside, Iris spoke again still more firmly.

'I believe you are wearing this coat to-day for a purpose, Lady Thwaite. It cannot be a good purpose. I beseech you to stop before it is too late.'

'There ain't no use in stopping,' said Honor doggedly. 'You cannot prevent me doing my will. But I'll tell you the truth of my own accord, since you seem to care what becomes of me, which others as might, don't no longer. He's been at home and asleep all the morning, and he'll get up as cross as a bear afore he goes off again. But I've stole a march upon him,' with a shade of triumph and cunning in her tone. 'He forgot hisself the last time we had words—which were no

farther gone than late last night, and swore he would lock me up if I went near Guilds' folk again. It were Satan reproving sin, after the company he has been keeping. I will see every Guild—man and woman—if I like, for the sake of one as bore the name and worshipped the ground I trod on, instead of taking me up and casting me down, and being ashamed of me like a cursed fine gentleman, for all he pretended to be one of the people. I was afeard he might be about by this time and see me from his winder, or the terrace, and give chase, and demean hisself to lift his hand to a woman, though I don't take no pride in belonging to the weaker sex. I ain't entitled to. I'm as strong as most men, but Will is more than my match. So I borrowed Bill's toggery without leave, and now I am bound either for Guilds' cottage, where they'll take me in however I like to come, and make me as bad as theirselves, I dare say—but they will not look down on me; or maybe I'll go to Hawley Scrub, as the fancy takes me. I were always a fanciful lass if you'll believe me. Father's from home over at Birkett; but the pond's there where Will and me first set eyes on each other, after I had drawed him out.

It will take me in too, never fear, and make no words about it, and there will be none to pull me out. What do you say to that, Miss Compton?' with a more desperate gleam in her grey eyes.

'I say "never," Honor,' cried Iris, tightening her clasp on the woman with the heaving breast under the man's coat. 'What! you have still some feeling for your husband. I believe you love him in your inmost soul, and you would lay *that* on him—his and your shame, with a separation worse than if you were dead? Or you would fling your death at his door and bring the crime of murder to sit on his pillow. I would rather have suffered the cruellest injury, I would sooner have died a thousand innocent deaths in obedience to God's summons—not by rushing into His presence uncalled for and unprepared. Oh! woman, how could you think for an instant of doing such wrong?'

Honor flinched at the cry, her flashing eyes fell, her hand shook, she writhed uneasily in Iris's hold.

'Don't be so hard on me, Miss Compton,' she protested; 'I ain't given to thinking. I was wild with him and myself, and I just

did the first thing that came into my head. But I didn't mean to hurt him like that. What can I do? It is past help now,' she said, with returning recklessness. 'I'll go my ways where nobody will ever find me, and nobody will know whether I'm dead or alive, and, what's more, nobody will care, unless it may be father, in a sort.'

'That is not true,' said Iris. 'I should care; Sir William would care most of all. He did care for you, and chose you and went out of his place to marry you. I need not fear to offend you by saying it, for everybody knows it, you among the rest; and it should soften instead of hardening your heart, and make you proud instead of angry. I dare say you have tried him, though you might not always know it or mean it, and he has tried you. But though there is strife between you and miserable wrong and trouble, there is not the worst so that neither can forgive and forget—so that you may not go back to him and both think better of it and be happy yet,' pled Iris, with the great tenderness and charity which have in them something of the divine.

Lady Thwaite's heart melted in its perversity, and it was with a groan she said,

flinging down the whip and striking her hands together :

‘ I can’t—I can’t. Happiness ain’t for him and me. I daren’t face him like this ; he’s mad now when he’s roused. I put on Bill Rogers’s clothes half for a lark, half to finish our misery somehow. You do be good and kind, but I have seen how you looked when you knowed me. You belong to the gentle-folks, and Will is part gentleman in spite of hisself. I can tell now how he’ll take it. I’ll not witness his hate and disgust—that is what it has come to—neither will I ax him to forgive me ; it ain’t in me. I can’t go back.’

‘ Yes, you can ; for his sake if not for your own. It is his and your last chance ; I am sure of it. I will go back with you. I am not frightened for his anger. We are not far from Whitehills, and I shall still get home to Lambford without keeping grandmamma waiting.’

The brave soul made a hasty little practical calculation, which was by no means uncalled for.

Lady Thwaite was still more shaken in her mind by Miss Compton’s magnanimous offer. Little as Honor knew, she was sensible, not

only that Iris Compton was in the deepest earnest, but that she must feel convinced the fate, for life and death, of two of her fellow-mortals hung in the balance, before she made the proposal.

‘It would make a sight of difference,’ Honor allowed hesitatingly, ‘if the likes of you showed you didn’t mind being seen with me in what was either a poor bit of a frolic, or a fit of moon-struck madness, I can’t rightly tell which it were myself. If you did me the honour—I know it is an honour, though I ben’t mannerly—of bearing me company, and calling at Whitehills, he might change his tune, for I know he thought a deal of you, though you gave him the sack—served him right!’ exclaimed Honor hotly. ‘What call had he to even hissself to you, who weren’t his price at no hand? He were like me and my folk—he could tell that when he came to his senses; and he never let your name pass his lips save once after he drew up with me. But it do seem mean like to let you, as is a real lady, lower yourself for them that ain’t worth it.’

Lady Thwaite still hung back, her better nature reasserting itself.

‘Never mind me; I am not lowering myself; and you are worth—every human creature is worth—oh! how infinitely more in God’s sight!’ urged Iris, fearing the loss of the advantage she had gained. ‘Come, Lady Thwaite,’ she went on, as if she were impatient to go, ‘we have no time to spare. You can understand that I must not keep Lady Fermor waiting dinner.’

‘And you are in a mighty haste in case anybody should come along the road and light on we two, and me in a man’s clothes,’ said Lady Thwaite a little sarcastically, even while she turned and walked with a curious mixture of affront, humility, and pettishness beside Iris.

‘I confess I am,’ said Iris frankly; and her candour was another point in favour of her suit.

‘I’ll tell you what we’ll do, miss,’ said Lady Thwaite more briskly, when they had gone a little way. ‘If my master ain’t about, we’ll go round by one of them side doors, or by one of them ground-floor winders as is often left open handy, and I’ll slip in, and nobody will be the wiser. If Bill have missed his best clothes, he won’t peach on me, I

know, and I'll promise you afore we part, Miss Compton, I'll not go a-larking no more. I'll try, as sure as death I'll try, to stay more at home, though a great empty house, and a man brought home like a log or a bull of Bashan ain't much of an inducement to keep house, which I weren't used to, and didn't pretend to; and he knowed it before he married me. But I'll not provoke him more than I can help, and maybe he'll grow steadier with the summer, and the fishing, and the shooting season all coming on.'

'I hope it with all my heart,' said Iris fervently; but she stopped short at the same time, and stood with her fine little head held up. 'If I go with you, Lady Thwaite, you shan't steal into your husband's house, by a back door or an open window, like a thief or a dog. You'll go in by the principal entrance and the hall, in the most open way; and you'll walk straight to Sir William if he is at home. I shall be at your elbow to bear you out in your tale, or to speak for you, if you won't or can't do it for yourself. It is not much you will have to say. "I went out on a foolish frolic because I was very unhappy, too unhappy to know well what I was about;

but I soon found how silly and wrong I had been. I have come back at once to tell you all about it, if you will listen to me, and to ask you to pardon me, for we all need pardon, erring as we do every hour of our lives." Surely that is not very hard to say?"

Honor bit her lips, and plucked at the buttons on her coat, but she made no further opposition.

The strange couple walked quickly in the direction of Whitehills. They were fortunate in meeting few wayfarers; none recognised Lady Thwaite in her masquerade. Of those who guessed Iris's identity nobody was disengaged or sharp enough to think it odd that Miss Compton should walk with a groom behind her. For Honor fell a pace or two back when the first two-legged animal came in sight, and determinedly kept the second rank till the women reached their destination.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEAUTY AT THE FEET OF THE BEAST.

IT was in such circumstances that Iris entered the great gates of Whitehills again. She was under too severe a strain, too far carried out of herself, to notice, as Colonel Bell and his companions had been quick to observe, the change—the gradual but sure growth of dilapidation, of indifference and neglect, which would soon amount to declared war against every manifestation of the orderly and beautiful. In the whole history of Whitehills, stretching back to the Norman invasions, a more apparently ill-matched pair never drew near the manor-house—the slender gentlewoman with the child-like, flower-like face, in her quiet grey serge walking-dress, the vision of whom, including her perfect womanly kindness, had once burst like a revelation on Sir William, and the groom, who looked so odd

and incongruous from the moment he drew back and drooped his head with something of a hang-dog air.

The hall-door stood open ; Iris went in, and paused for her companion to take the lead.

‘ You must show the way in your own house, Lady Thwaite.’

Thus spurred on, however gently, Honor started forward with a muttered, ‘ As I’m in for it, the sooner it’s over the better.’ She made a dash through a side passage and turned the handle of a closed door. It was that of the comfortless, un-homely room which she had made the living-room of herself and her husband.

Iris had no time or power to make comparisons. Yet she received a general impression of the shabbiness and sluttishness of the room, contrasted as it was in the background of her imagination with the spacious width and old gentle breeding of the entrance hall, the library, and the drawing-room with its broad and deep lights and shadows, its Sir Joshuas, its Flemish carved chimney-piece.

Sir William was sitting lolling and smoking over the unremoved relics of a meal which

had been breakfast and dinner in one. His features were swollen and blurred, his fine eyes like burnt-out fires; yet he did not look so much bloated as ghastly with the fierce pursuit of fiery oblivion and an untimely end. He stared in a puzzled, stupid way at the semblance of Bill Rogers, who was not Bill, but who else he was Sir William could not at the moment tell. And when he looked past the groom and recognised Iris Compton standing there, he started to his feet, pulled the pipe from his mouth and stared wildly, with a recoil like that of a man who sees a visitant from another world and cannot bear the unnatural contact, but is ready to cry as of old, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.'

Then Iris spoke for Lady Thwaite almost word for word as the girl had dictated, except that she had to say one sentence on her own behalf, to account for her presence there:

'I have come with Lady Thwaite, Sir William—I trust you will forgive the intrusion;' as she spoke she caught Honor again by the sleeve, and letting her hand slip down, clasped in her slim white fingers the brown fist already clenched in swelling mortification and rising wrath.

His brow grew black, as full intelligence returned to him.

‘Did she—that creature aping a man—dare to ask you to plead for her?’ he growled out.

‘No, Sir William. I met your wife by chance; I knew her even in that absurd dress, and hailed her. She and I were old friends. I begged her to give up a foolish—it might be a fatal adventure. I offered to go back with her and speak to you. It was all my doing,’ said Iris steadily.

‘Then, Miss Compton,’ he cried, flinging out his hand as if to part the two, ‘you are nigh as idiotic as she is. Why don’t Lady Fermor take care of you, since you can’t look after yourself? Do you know what that woman there has been doing, and what sort she is, when you stand there clasping hands with her? Do you know what this house has grown to? What I am? What I was before I ever saw you? a low dog of a drunken, riotous soldier under sentence of the lash like the brute I was and am.’

Iris became as pale as death, but she did not move. It was Lady Thwaite who snatched her hand away and darted forward, crying out:

‘Will, you shall never belie and shame yourself in my hearing, and I not contradict you, look on me as you may. What although the pig-headed fools wanted to lash you, it was them as were the brutes, and not you.’ She was without her hat, and her abundant hair, which had been tucked up in its crown, had fallen down, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling, her white teeth showing. She looked no longer like the mockery of a man, but like a beautiful wild Amazon. Before he knew what she was about, she had thrown herself upon his neck, and dragged down his collar. ‘See, Miss Compton, if that ain’t the scar of a brave soldier as fought his country’s battles, and deserved more from her than he ever got. And there is the mark of a bullet wound in his breast as took a close shave of his lungs, and of another sword-cut across his arm, which he had when he was carrying out wounded men under fire. Though the authorities had done what they wanted, and scored his young back with base lashes, I know you’ll never think they could have scored out them honourable marks, as he’ll bear to the day of his death.’

‘Hold off, Honor! shut up, woman! what

have you to do with me and my scratches?' exclaimed Sir William hoarsely, as he shook himself free, but the voice was less strident, the action less violent. There was relenting in his impatience and confusion in his face.

'Yes, I know,' said Iris, and though her voice shook, the tone was yet clear and sweet. 'Whatever you two have come through, or done, however low you have been brought, he has been a gallant soldier, a brave and true man, and you are a generous woman. Oh! then—then, why will you die?' she broke down a little, and in spite of herself the tears began to stream from her eyes, so that she put up her hands to hide them.

'Don't, miss—oh, don't!' implored Lady Thwaite.

'For mercy's sake don't, Miss Compton!' besought Sir William. 'She ought not to have brought you here. She does not always know what she is doing, poor wretch, any more than I do myself. We must get you out of this here at once. Don't cry for the like of us.'

'And what though I cried my eyes out?' protested Iris indignantly and despairingly,

letting her hands fall from her wet face—
'what would it matter? a poor, weak, selfish girl like me? Do you not believe I would do anything—anything in the world, that I would kneel down to you and beg you to suffer yourselves to be saved, if that would do any good? But to think that the wisdom of all the ages has come down to enlighten us, and the blood of the Holiest has been shed to purify us, and we may have God if we will and heaven for the asking, and we will not! We may rise above our dull, miserable selves, and our evil companions and sin-stained dwellings to the home and the company of our Maker, and Father, and Saviour, and of the angels and all the just and gentle who ever breathed, and struggled, and conquered before us. But we turn our backs and choose to sink into even deeper defilement, till we perish here, whatever Divine pity may do for us yonder. Oh! it is pitiable, terrible! God have mercy on our horrible ingratitude, stubbornness, and unbelief!' She stood wringing her hands in the bitterness of her heart, associating herself with her hearers, reproaching herself as if she were the greatest sinner of all.

Lady Thwaite drew aside, touched, tamed, trembling a little as if she were under the influence of a half-comprehended spell. But Sir William was shaken to the very centre of his moral being. He too stood silent for a few seconds opposite Iris, with his head bent, his arms hanging down, and the sweat-drops gathering on his forehead. Then he spoke low but distinctly in spite of the thrill and vibration of great agitation.

‘Miss Compton, I gave a promise to my sister Jen, the bravest, faithfulest woman that ever lived, save one like her. My sister was but a poor woman who had done for me all my life. She was lying on her dying bed, dying of her last hard fight to serve me. She asked but one favour, which I was fain to grant, that I should never again touch the drink which took away my wits. You know what my word has been worth; but if you will take it at its lowest value, I’ll give it once more, and God help me to keep it! I am aware of what I am saying and doing, and I know that I have fallen back to the mouth of the pit, that I have raised anew a devil and clothed it with my very flesh so that it can thirst and crave, and madden, and sicken

me, to loose my grip. But if there is any of the man left in me, if God has not forsaken me utterly, I'll rise and throttle my enemy, thinking of your tears and prayers.'

'Think of something a whole earth and heaven higher,' she cried; 'think of God on the blood-stained cross, and Man on the great white throne.'

'I was taught the story when I was a little chap by Jen,' he said. 'I was not bred an ignorant heathen, the more guilt and shame to me. But, Miss Compton, a saint may help a sinner to read between the lines of his Bible and understand his Maker's ways, so the thought of you may help me. As for poor Honor there, she was never a woman given over to drink as I have been. If I led you to think it of her I deceived you unknowingly. My head is in a whirl and I was never a speechifier—not great at words even when my heart was in my mouth. I want you to hear me say before her that I believe I have had little patience with her from the beginning. I am sure I was mortal hard upon her after I took to drink again.'

'That's enough, Will, more than enough,' cried Honor passionately. 'I hate to hear

you accusing of yourself—I won't have it. You may do it to me, but not to another. And you know I ain't all that I should be myself; I ain't good as gold like her there—every inch of her.'

'Then we must clear her out of this the first thing, that will be better than blessing her for entering our doors,' he said, leaving the room.

The moment Iris's errand was done and the strain on her relaxed, though she was convinced she had acted rightly, and felt humbly thankful that she had done it, she began to realize the awkwardness of the situation, standing in that room, beside the strange woman shrinking now in the man's clothes she had borrowed, even without the account to be rendered to Lady Fermor which stared Iris in the face all the time. She was sensible Sir William was right, and that she should be gone.

Lady Thwaite would have asked Iris to take some refreshment, but the hostess did not know how to make the request, at such a time, to such a guest. With a quick perception of the difficulty, Iris went to the table, took up a biscuit, and began to eat. 'I had luncheon at

the Rectory, but I am too late for afternoon tea at home. No, thanks; you must not get fresh tea or coffee for me, Lady Thwaite; this biscuit will do perfectly. I must go at once, to be in time for dinner.'

In the meantime the spring mist had so condensed as to be falling down in drizzling rain.

'I don't mind it, I assure you,' Iris asserted. 'I have an umbrella; I am accustomed to be out in wet weather, and it does not hurt me. We are quite near.' She hardly knew what she was saying.

Sir William came back at that moment to tell her he had ordered the carriage, and Bill Rogers would see her home. He did not offer her either his escort or his wife's. When it came to that, at the mention of Bill, whom she had personified, Lady Thwaite had just enough perception to turn scarlet, and make a quick retreat to avoid meeting her double, in her husband's and Miss Compton's presence, or lest any of the other servants should catch a glimpse of her ladyship in her odd garments before their master and the first 'real lady' who had crossed the threshold since its mistress came to Whitehills.

Sir William went with Iris to the hall-door. 'Miss Compton,' he said, 'whatever may come of this, it ain't words that can make a fit acknowledgment for what you've sought to do to-day; words are idle. Only God can reward you, though He may well have forsaken me, and He may not listen even when I call down blessings on your head.'

'God never forsakes,' she said. 'A mother may forget her child, but He will not forsake. God bless you and Honor, your wife, Sir William!'

He hesitated whether to leave Bill, as beyond comparison the worthier of the two men, to put her into the carriage; but she ended the doubt, which she had not guessed, by holding out her hand to Sir William.

She drove away in the clouding-over afternoon, as she had disappeared in the gathering darkness on the first evening that he had heard of her existence—the polar star of his life, which had come so near and yet gone so far from him; the star that was fire, not water, which, if he could repent enough to be converted and turn from the error of his ways so as to reach heaven at last, might yet shine down upon him from the height of glory.

Something of the glory of self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice was still kindling up Iris's little face, though it blanched visibly every moment before the anticipated encounter with Lady Fermor ; something of the glow of that noblest enthusiasm which for the time breaks down social barriers was yet bracing her nerves and warming her heart, when she alighted before the hall-door at Lambford, and stood a moment to thank Bill. ' You are William, our little housemaid's brother,' she said brightly. ' Jenny is a good girl and a good servant, and so I am sure are you. Such servants are beyond price. Let me thank you again, and say how sorry I am for bringing you out and getting you wet.'

Bill louted low like an ancient squire. ' You have nothing to thank me for, miss,' he managed to say. ' It would have been a rare pleasure to sit on the box, with such as you inside, though it had been raining cats and dogs, which it is only a spring shower that don't hurt a bit. But if I might make bold and take the liberty, I would thank you, miss, and so would everybody as cares for as good a master as ever lived, and nobody's enemy but his own, to this day; and a mistress that

ain't anything like right-down wicious, bless you, only restless and full of jibbing and bolting, because she weren't ever broken in or trained to go in harness. If you will forgive me, miss, for saying so much, since Jenny has told me the kind young lady you are, you may care to hear what a comfort it is to a stupid block as ain't much good, to find the likes of you showing mercy and holding out your hand to his betters.'

Iris did not preach what she would not practise. She carried the head that was beginning to ache, and the heart to flutter, and the little white face where they would meet no pity from Lady Fermor.

The old woman, in her shawls and wraps, was already in the dining-room, sitting at the head of the table, though the second dinner-bell had not rung. She had been fuming over Iris's unusually prolonged absence, and had stolen a march upon her in order to convict her of being too late. Lady Fermor was in an additional wrath with the cook for not having the dinner ready before the appointed hour. 'Good heavens, child! where have you been?' she demanded angrily. 'I thought you had run away, and, upon my word, you

look like it; only,' she added cynically, regardless of the fact that the cut she was about to give ought to have wounded herself first, penetrating through the thick coarse skin till it reached a vital part, 'when the members of our family run away they are not like the lost halfpenny—they never come back again.'

'I am very sorry I have made you anxious, grandmamma. I am glad you have not waited for me,' began Iris a little breathlessly.

'If you think I was anxious about your white kitten's face you are very much mistaken. I was only anxious for our credit, which, being brittle ware, needs to be carefully handled. No, I have not waited for you; why should I? But where have you been dawdling?. Out with it. A lad would have spoken at once, and though he had been at more mischief, at least it would have been in manly scrapes, not wretched girlish trifling and pottering.'

'I was at Whitehills.'

'At Whitehills! Are you crazy?' cried Lady Fermor incredulously.

'No. I went there with Lady Thwaite.'

'Lady Thwaite! What! has she returned? I thought she was still in Rome. And what the dickens did she mean by carrying you

there? To cloak her own hypocrisy and greed in going into low company. Of course, I should have forbidden it if anybody had thought it worth while to ask my leave. It was the height of impertinence in Lady Thwaite to take you anywhere without getting my consent. Iris, you are even sillier and more stupid than I could have imagined you. I must bestir myself in my old age and tie you to my apron-string.'

'I was not with that Lady Thwaite,' said Iris, with dry lips; 'not with your Lady Thwaite, Sir John's widow; she has not come home that I know of. I was with Sir William's wife.'

'Girl!' exclaimed Lady Fermor, striking the table with her closed hand, and said no more.

'Grandmamma, I could not help it. I met her as I was coming home from the Rectory. I knew her though she was in man's clothes—I am sorry to say—in her groom's clothes. I had to stop her. She admitted two things—she was going to the Guilds—I don't know if you remember them; they are the worst family in the parish, and I had just heard the Actons say that the very worst Guild of all, the man-

Sir William Thwaite threatens to bring before the justices, has been boasting in the village that he could get Lady Thwaite to come to him at any place, at any hour, by a wag of his finger, because she was once to have married his brother Hughie, and because she has set herself against her husband. She was either going to the Guilds to compromise herself beyond redemption, or she would have drowned herself in the pond at Hawley Scrub. I could not walk past and let her go on to sin, or turn aside to die. You know I could not, if it was possible for me to help her. I got her to return home with me, and I think that she and Sir William have made up their quarrel, and may do better yet. He sent the carriage home with me. That is all.'

'All! I should say it was,' gasped Lady Fermor in one of the furies which were restrained perforce, and were so much more terrible for their restraint, because they contended with the weakness of age, and made her look like a devil-possessed mummy gnashing her teeth, but unable to do more. 'How dare you come to me with such a vile story? What had you to do with these people, unless, indeed, that you were at the bottom of all this

mischievous and misery? Like the wilful, insolent chit you were, you drove the fellow to a low barbarian of a wife, and to drink. You lost your one chance; you made me the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood, and I bore it without lifting my hand to strike you, or turn you from my doors. As if that were not enough, and too much for my poor patience, you go and make friends with this creature of the highways and hedges. You are not deterred from meeting her, like the disgrace to her sex that she is, in man's clothes; and where any other girl of your rank who made any pretence to delicacy—to common decency, would have felt shocked, or pretended it at least, and would have crossed to the other side of the road, and looked in the air or on the ground till the woman passed by, you chose to be hail-fellow-well-met with her.' Lady Fermor paused for a moment exhausted.

Iris tried to strike in:

'I knew her when I was a little girl. It was very foolish and wrong of her to put on men's clothes. I was shocked; but Nanny Hollis once wore her younger brother's clothes, and walked through the village with Maudie. Mr. Hollis was not told, but her mother did

nothing save laugh, and you only called Nanny a pickle of a girl,' Iris ventured wistfully to remind her grandmother.

'Nanny Hollis was not a married woman, and her brother's clothes were different from a groom's,' said Lady Fermor truly enough in her sternness. 'I hope you are not such an utter imbecile as to fail to see that there is one law for a family like the Hollises and another for the scum of the earth. But you didn't rush off and hide your face; you turned and went with the depraved gipsy to the wretched man whom she had inveigled, who had wanted you, whom you had sent to his ruin.'

'It was to save her and him from the last sin and misery,' urged Iris, forgetting the prohibition to cast pearls before swine. 'If I had anything to do with their wretchedness, I was the more bound to aid them.'

'Child, I sometimes wonder whether you have been sent to torment me before my time, till I am beside myself, like some miserable annoyance which I could have brushed aside without a thought when I was young and strong; whether you speak and act simply for the purpose of exasperating me; or

whether it is all done out of pure fatuousness of mind. I can tell you that you have enough to do to look after yourself, without inviting all the vagabonds and blackguards in the country to hang on by your skirts. Do you know what the thing that pious puritans and ninnies call "a good name" means? Do you know what it is worth in the eyes of the fools and hypocrites of this world? Are you aware that you have come into the world with a smirched shred of a name, in spite of your airs and scruples—though you seem to have cast aside the last of your detestable goody-goodiness? Why, the women of your family who lived before you, and were as strong drink to your milk-and-water, played away your good name before you were born. They had something for their play; they enjoyed life while it lasted; but you are only fit to clutch your rag and make the most of it. I have told you it was not to be trifled with, and that it was little I could do for you or your mother before you—so little that, though she was a harmless fool, I was fain to dispose of her to the first scamp, with the show of a good rental, who would take her off my hands. What you might call a good

man would not have ventured near her, or had a gift of her, any more than he would have of you.'

'Oh! grandmamma, for mercy's sake don't say such things!' implored Iris, putting her hands upon her ears.

But the old woman caught the hands and pulled them down.

'You shall eat of the tree of the knowledge of evil, as your flourishing friend the Rector would call it, though it should set your teeth on edge, if that is the only thing to bring you to your senses and humble you. Who takes the trouble to separate between the girl and the people she has come of, who have brought her up, with small reward for their pains, I must say? Ask Tom Mildmay's wife what she thinks of you, and whether she would invite you to pay her a visit *en famille*, though her boys are still in petticoats and her girls in short frocks and pinafores. Was it for such a one, whose name is as shaky as a tottering tree, whose fame has been breathed upon, though she herself may creep about as if she were begging folk's pardon, and getting up good deeds—I suppose as a kind of

sacrifice to atone for her people's free treatment of the decalogue—I say was it for the like of her to go within a mile of Sir William Thwaite, with his randy beggar wife, and their disreputable house and doings? Mrs. Hollis—even Nanny and Maudie, might go for their amusement, and laugh themselves out of the adventure. The last are well-known to be girls of spirit, besides they have no clog at their heels; they are not spotted. Mrs. Acton and the girl Lucy, or any other clergyman's wife and daughter, might hand in tracts—it is their business—wipe the dust from their feet, and nothing be thought or said. But for you, girl! even I can hardly believe that you went from any other motive than a secret hankering after the miserable fellow you thought fit to reject last year. There, that is the bell at last. It ought to have rung half an hour ago, and I'll pay out Fordham and the rest for it. I'm old, and Fermor is a wreck; but I am not come to the pass of being either neglected or bullied by my servants, or, for that matter, by my grand-daughter. You may stay upstairs and have your dinner sent to you. Your company gives me little pleasure at

any time, and I am not forced to bear it when you have made it intolerable to me. If starving on bread and water would be likely to do you any good, you may be sure I should try it; but I know to my cost the conceit and self-assurance of young people in this generation, and that if you have not stout stomachs, you have the capacity of mules for sticking to your point. I don't mean to give you the consolation of making yourself a martyr at my expense. Besides, I'm a good grandmother, Miss Compton,' with another snarl under an ugly grin; 'I don't wish to set servants and people talking of you, so long as I can prevent it, for when all is said and done, I dare say you will go the way of those who came before you. It is in the blood. Your day of temptation and downfall will dawn, if it is not hovering over you already. But come when it may, it can only be a half-and-half, whimpering, sinning and repenting, altogether contemptible day, not to be compared to some I have seen, when men and women sinned "with a cart-rope," as your friend the Rector would tell you, with a dash and a swing which you will never know.'

With this hideous, scornful prophecy, Iris, too crushed and aghast almost to be sensible of her deliverance, was at liberty to flee from her accuser.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH SMITES TWICE.

WHILE Sir William Thwaite was still under the constraining influence of Iris Compton's appeal, a thought struck him.

'Why should we not leave this place, my lass?' he said, addressing Honor, while the two sat together, hot with excitement, yet shivering with momentary reaction, physically wretched and uncomfortable, shy, affronted, neither united nor disunited, on the evening of the day that Iris had been to Whitehills. 'Why should we not get rid of Whitehills?' He looked round him with more of loathing disgust than sad yearning—the last was for the woods and fields, the blue horizon which had grown familiar to him, the far-reaching yet often pale dim sky. 'It's little good we've been and done here. We'll go to some new land, such as I've

read of, as rude as its colonists ; we'll break it and ourselves in together. We'll hold it against the wild beasts and the wild men, till we've tamed them and ourselves—which is like to be the harder job,' he ended with a heavy sigh.

'Oh ! shall we, Will?' cried Honor, with the first cry of real joy and eagerness which she had uttered for many a day. 'That will be grand—a life worth living. That will be a thousand times better than shooting and hooking harmless beasts and birds and fishes here. I had a notion of the kind when father and I were going to 'Merica—an out-of-the-way bit I think they called Kansas. But father's nigh done, and young Abe and me, we didn't sort together over-well when he was at home. I doubted he would not care for the hills and plains and woods ; he would mind a deal more trying his luck at the diggings, or even at the cards which Eastham folk play in houses like this, and in hovels like ours at Hawley Scrub, you know, Will, from the time the players can hold the pasteboard. But I'll work and dig, and plant and build, as well as shoot with you, and be your fit mate. I can kindle

a fire and boil a kettle, and bake and roast, and wash and dry, and rough-darn for you, and you'll want nought else out there. We'll leave books and fine manners behind us.'

'So be it,' he said, after an instant's pause, while he looked a little drearily into the fire.

'And you'll never more regret them, Will,' she pressed him with hungry eyes—'you'll never fret after them, or think it would have been better if you had knowed how to keep still an idle gentleman among fine gentlemen and ladies in England. You might have done it without crossing the seas, without setting your hand to work or going out with your gun to fill the pot and keep you and me from starving—instead of filling a bag with useless hares and birds to gift away, or sell in the shop, with nigh as much secrecy as father has been wont to sell his filched game—without risk, without hardship, which is fine for a change, without me.'

'It will be for you to keep me from fretting, Honor,' he tried to say more lightly—'to make me feel that what is, is best—to teach me, as I'm sure you will, that I could never do without you;' and she was satisfied for the moment.

So it soon came to be roughly understood that Sir William had pulled up sufficiently to decree that the saturnalia should come to an end, so far as the place was concerned, at least. Sir William would have sold Whitehills, had it been in his power; as it was, the house was to be let. He and Lady Thwaite were going away—not to the Continent to retrench, not to German baths to drink mineral waters, not to Monte Carlo to play—but to the wilds of America, in company with old Abe Smith, where the whole party would doubtless soon sink into the gulphs of oblivion provided for the lower class of sinners. And if the couple did not send home an heir in the course of years, Whitehills would pass into the Court of Chancery, to be stranded there till a fresh sprout, refined or rude, from the family tree of the Thwaites could spring up.

Sir William had severed himself from the squirearchy some time before, so that their interest in him had begun to die out, after the first burst of reprobation, though they still felt a concern for Whitehills, which he was not going to carry away with him. Besides, the attention of the neighbourhood was drawn

to another quarter at the time, by the additional news that old Lord Fermor was dying at last. He had been far longer dead to the world than Sir William Thwaite had been ; but the peer had this claim, that he had been one of themselves from first to last, and that his career fifty years before had been notably before a greater public—not much to its edification. Neither was it to the edification of Eastham that so many stories of him were revived as he lay on his deathbed, and even found their way into the newspapers again, until poor Iris Compton dreaded to cut one open, and looked fearfully at the first words of every local paragraph. She had a distressed consciousness that her neighbours of every degree pushed certain journals out of sight whenever she happened to come across the papers—in the village post-office, thrown down on a carriage cushion, spread out on a Knotley shop-counter.

Lady Fermor had always been her husband's head nurse in his serious attacks of illness, and she continued punctual in her attendance on him till death released her from her post. For the last day and night she never quitted his bedroom. Iris was not permitted to enter,

but all who came and went from the semi-darkness and the muffled sounds, into daylight and natural noise, appeared with disturbed or scared faces. Even Soames, in her reticence and composure, broke down a little, and murmured she wondered Lady Fermor could stand it. She did not think she herself could—not though it were for a pension—Soames's one idea of a bribe.

The incident leaked out from other sources that Lord Fermor, who was pronounced unconscious, while he retained his powers of speech, had been calling for his wife, with hardly an interval of silence, throughout his protracted death-struggle. Sometimes he spoke in a voice of piteous entreaty, sometimes of abject terror, sometimes of hoarse reproach, sometimes of sharp summons. But however the tones might vary, there was never an alteration in the name, it was always that of his master-spirit, his temptress, the curse of his life.

She kept answering in her loud, bold voice. At first she said, 'I'm here, Fermor,' as if she would rouse him to the fact of her presence. Then she cried, 'I'm coming, I'm coming, Fermor.' At last she fell into 'I'll follow;

never doubt, I'll follow, Fermor,' with a kind of fierce impatience and determination ringing out in reply to the feeble call. When all was still, Lady Fermor came downstairs with a face almost as pinched and grey as the face in the room above, but making no other sign.

Iris looked at her grandmother with generous, tender longing. Could the stout heart have gone through the awful ordeal without being melted? Would not the aged new-made widow suffer a word of sympathy from one of her last descendants, the sole descendant of him who was gone?

The Rector, who had been waiting in the house, had followed Lady Fermor downstairs. He advanced and said :

'My dear and venerable friend, our dear departed friend has left us full of years'—he had almost added 'and full of honours'—but stopped in time, a little awkwardly. 'He has been long spared to us; we must not refuse to give him up, though our human hearts may bleed. We look to you—the greatest sufferer of us all—for an example of fortitude. Dear Lady Fermor, he is not lost, but gone before. You must not give way.'

She looked at the speaker with the self-

command that had never faltered, and a supercilious expression, as if she were tempted to say, 'Don't I know all that already? Can't I tell beforehand what you and your cloth are prepared to whisper into my ear?' But when she opened her mouth it was to make another remark :

'When my lord was at his best, he was a man, and not a milksop,' she said, with emphasis. Then she went on in a lower key, 'It would have been better for him to have been taken away before he became a burden to himself and others.' With the next breath she observed briskly to her speechless coadjutor, 'Come, we have a great deal of business on our hands. I sent last night for Metcalfe,' naming the family lawyer. 'Has he come or written? Tom Mildmay—I beg his pardon—the present Lord Fermor must be telegraphed for. The funeral arrangements ought to be made immediately.'

The dowager Lady Fermor gave no thought to rest or seclusion. The world had always ranked with her, if not before, certainly immediately after, the flesh and the devil. The world was of signal importance to her still, and she had been fond of business in her

prime. Even in its grimest aspect, and under the burden of her years, she looked to it for solace and abstraction.

‘She must miss and mourn for him in her own way,’ Iris said to herself slowly.

She was not wanted in the busy days which followed. She wandered away by herself, or sat seeking to recall the few kindnesses her grandfather had shown her. With a little hesitation, lest her grandmother should object to the gentle tribute, Iris gathered and arranged the flowers which were to lie on his bed and on his coffin, as the last dutiful service she could render him.

Lady Fermor would not be persuaded to remain away from the funeral. She tottered on Iris’s arm by choice from the mourning-coach to the church, and then to the mouth of the vault to look down with dry eyes on Lord Fermor’s final resting-place, in the niche next to that in which her own worn-out body would soon lie.

At the reading of the will, when Iris was again present with her grandmother, it was found, as most of those interested were previously aware, that by the agreement with Tom Mildmay, at the date when the uncle

and nephew had seen fit, for their mutual convenience, to be reconciled, Lambford, where Lady Fermor had so long reigned, was still secured to her as a residence during the few years she could survive. In addition to her furniture, Lord Fermor bequeathed to his widow the remnant of the fortune which was at his disposal, apart from the entailed estates. The bequest was practically unconditional, for the slight mention of his grand-daughter Iris's name, though it was coupled with a recommendation, still left the succession entirely a matter of Lady Fermor's will and pleasure. She had caused it to be written that the testator devised such and such property for her use during her lifetime, and on her death, for the use of their grand-daughter, Iris Elizabeth Compton, or to be disposed of in any other way which Lady Fermor should see fit.

Iris was thus left dependent on her grandmother. The girl had never conceived of any other disposal of Lord Fermor's means than that he had executed. Brought up under the sole control of Lady Fermor, accustomed to her precedence in everything, it appeared but natural and right that she should continue the

sovereign power. No sense of hardship or deprivation from the settlement occurred to Iris. Her grandfather had the right to do what he liked with such a portion of the world's goods as he did not hold in trust for the Mildmays, and what could be simpler or more comprehensible than that he should transfer his power to her grandmother? Iris might live to put a different interpretation on such a will, but she would always be the reverse of her grandmother in worldliness as in every other quality, unless in that of courage.

Later in the afternoon of the funeral-day, not only the new Lord Fermor but the new dowager continued still closeted with business men, lingering over trifles which were pronounced of moment, and which held a fascination both for the heir and his natural enemy, with whom he was too prudent a man to quarrel, preferring to maintain towards her his old attitude of cold politeness and armed neutrality. Iris sat alone in the drawing-room amidst the pompous space and tarnished gorgeousness which seemed to mock at the narrow bounds of a coffin and the most glittering tinsel that could deck a coffin-lid.

She was at the farthest window to which she most frequently retreated. She was yielding herself up to that sense of the emptiness of the dwelling, and the hollowness of life itself, which is apt to haunt any sensitive imaginative mind, in a household from which its dead has been taken away to be buried out of sight, even when there has been no anguish of spirit in the rending of near ties. Then one of the servants came to her with a message. A lady had been inquiring several times that day at the nearest lodge, which was a short distance from the house. She had been asking for Miss Compton in reference to the possibility of seeing her. The lady was at the lodge now, waiting till Miss Compton should be told.

Iris thought of Lucy and her affectionate sympathy. The lodge-keeper was a stranger, who had taken service at Lambford only the other day. He and his wife might not recognise the Rector's daughter; and no doubt it was from reluctance to intrude at such a time, that even Lucy had not come on to the house.

Iris looked at her watch—there was time enough to spare before the first dinner-bell

rang, even if Lady Fermor did not eat her dinner, for once when she was in health, in her dressing-room. In that case, Iris would not appear as the only lady at the table. She ran up for her hat and jacket, and hurried to the lodge. It was a wild windy day, during which showers of hail had repeatedly pelted down the petals of the wild cherry blossom and scattered them about the walks. A blast came scurrying along faster than Iris walked, so that she could only distinguish a tall figure, surely taller than Lucy, standing looking out for her at the lodge-house door. The figure stepped forward to meet Iris. It was not Lucy Acton, it was Lady Thwaite.

Iris felt vexed and troubled. On this day of all days she would least like to annoy Lady Fermor. This was not a time and place for Lady Thwaite to appear when Iris could no more invite her up to the house than she could have bidden Sir William attend the recent funeral. It was something, however, that her ladyship was dressed with much greater propriety than on the last occasion when Iris had seen her. In fact, Lady Thwaite was clad more in accordance with the station to which Sir William had raised her, than Iris had yet

known her to be. Honor wore a fur-lined travelling-cloak wrapped round her to protect her from the driving wind and hail, and she had on a fur cap to match, which sheltered her head and became her. But, after all, the most suitable dress could not do much to qualify an unauthorized and undesirable visit.

‘You do not care to see me, Miss Compton,’ cried Lady Thwaite, speaking first; ‘but I could not go without one more look at you.’

‘Are you going so soon?’ answered Iris, startled. ‘I thought you were not to sail till next month, when the season would be more advanced, and you might depend on better weather.’

‘Father and I are getting so weary,’ said Lady Thwaite, with a little smile; ‘besides, one can never tell how many more opportunities there may be. I thought there might be a likelier chance of seeing you this afternoon than later, when other great folks be come to comfort you, and when Lady Fermor is able to take her ride in her carriage again.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Iris doubtfully; then she said more readily, in the goodness of her heart, ‘It was kind of you to wish to bid me good-bye, and I am sure you will not be

offended if I cannot stay long talking to you. You know poor Lord Fermor was only buried this morning, and I must not fret Lady Fermor to-day by being out of the way, should she want me.'

'No, to be sure,' Honor admitted frankly. 'But, my sakes! how tied up you are, and what a little delicate creature, if you will forgive me for saying so, you do look in your black. You are not much above my shoulder if we were to measure, miss.'

'I believe it without measuring,' said Iris, with a faint smile; 'more than that, as I am not very little—I am as tall as Miss Acton, for instance—you must be a big woman, big and strong, fit to face and conquer the world.'

'Ah! but it was you as faced and conquered me and Will, when I durst not have done it to him, not though he is my master. Now, weren't that strange? a delicate, dainty young lady as couldn't shoulder or fire a gun, not to save your life, but you could face the wild beastesses, which he said him and me were when the drink were in him and the rove on me!'

'It was not I,' said Iris; 'it was the good that was deep down in your own hearts; it

was the spirit of goodness striving with your spirits. If I helped you by a word or a look, that is my great reward. Oh ! Lady Thwaite, see that good overcomes. Fight and pray for yourself and your husband, and may God bless and prosper you in the land to which you are going !

‘That’s a kind wish, Miss Compton, and I’m main indebted to you for it and for all that went before it,’ said Honor less restlessly and flightily, in a more subdued, earnest tone. ‘Surely I’ll do my best, if—if he comes to me of his own free will, if he shows me beyond mistake that there is none as is like me to him, none—not even an angel from heaven as can come between us two.’ And again, with one of the quick revulsions natural to her moods, the craving for supremacy, the exacting tyranny of a proud and passionate temper flashed from her grey eyes.

‘Sir William has gone to you ; he has shown you that already,’ said Iris a little wearily, as she remembered with self-reproach afterwards. ‘Don’t play with your newly-found peace ; don’t be captious, and plague your husband with idle suspicions. I cannot tell—I am speaking from what I imagine and

what I have read, but I believe if you would keep a man you must trust him.' She was in haste to get back. 'Good-bye, Honor; I will not say farewell, for although we shall be far apart, there is no saying but that we may meet again.'

Iris did not know how far she would be, in time to come, from this early friend and late claimant on her pity and charity. The girl could not guess under what different conditions the two would meet again, as she hurried home, feeling that on this day she ought not to be abroad, ought not to be engaged in the most innocent unpremeditated interview of which her grandmother would disapprove. It seemed to her as if Honor Thwaite and her husband were melting away from her view, fast sinking beneath the horizon, gone together for their new chance and their united struggle in a fresh country, while she remained forlorn, standing by her colours, facing Lady Fermor and the world.

Under the circumstances, Iris heard nothing from the world without of Lady Thwaite and Sir William for the next ten days, when an appalling piece of intelligence startled and shocked her.

On the very morning following Lady Thwaite's visit to Iris, Sir William, to his unbounded surprise, dismay, and anger, found his wife's place vacant and herself gone without leave. She had left a letter for him primitively queer in caligraphy, orthography, and syntax generally, still queerer in sense, but eminently characteristic of the wayward woman :

‘DEAR WILL THWAITE,

‘By the time this retches you and finds you all well, father and me, we will have saled for ‘Merica. We, leastways I, for father did no more than I bid he, ‘ave stolen a march on you, and are starting in the small ‘ours so as train may retch Liverpool in time for us to sale in a himmigrant vessel as is to leve old England a month before the vessell in which you wos to take our births. The reson why, Will, is that I wishes to leave you free to make your chice anew. I am sensible as our marriage do not have ansered so far, and I have been a truble and a burden to you—druv you back to the wild curses of your youth. All that may be ended, I hop so, with all my hart for your sake, still more

than for my own; but I 'ave made up my mind, Will Thwaite, you shall not be forced to keep to your bond. If you prefers to stay on at Whitehills without the cumbrance I have been to you, if you would lick to go back to the ranks of the fine laddies and gentlemen as you're entitled to walk in, this here is to say you can and welcome. Even though I had not done you enuff harm already, I am not the womman to hold a man against the grain. But, Will, if you do care, the rod is before you as before me. You have not to do, but to come on in the next ship, as us spoke on, and father and me will be awaiting of you at New York. I can take caire of myself, as you know, and father, too, both; so no more at present, and I am your servant to command or your loving wife as you will.

‘HONOR THWAITE.’

Sir William Thwaite was not a meek man by nature. Events had left him full of honest compunction and desire to amend his ways, no doubt; but he was also sore, worried, and irritable.

He took great umbrage at this last very inconvenient and unseemly freak of Honor's.

He did not distrust her word or even her motive, but her plea of offering him the freedom which was not hers to give, and of testing his love, did not touch him, as it might have appealed to his heart had there been more of true love than of mere kindness and pity for her in his heart. He fell back on the charge of deceit and falsehood which he had been forced to bring against her from the first. She had been reared in an atmosphere of lying in speech and action, and the propensity clung to her ineradicably. He had never knowingly and wilfully lied to her, though she might have deceived herself with regard to the quality of his regard for her. She had promised to do her best; she had been elated and filled with sanguine anticipations of the wilds of Western America, and what had her good intentions and extravagant hopes come to? This undutiful step, with its complete overthrow of his plans and its cunning evasion of his authority. He predicted it would be always thus; she would be wrong-headed, perverse and crafty, if not treacherous, to the close of the chapter.

But he would circumvent her, if possible. She was not fit to take care of herself. Abe

was no proper protector for his daughter and another man's wife. She had taken away enough money for two steerage berths, which would throw her into the company the least capable of restraining and shielding her, while he did not believe she had sufficient means for the maintenance of herself and her father on landing.

Sir William set off within an hour of getting his wife's letter in pursuit of her. He hoped to arrive in Liverpool before the emigrant ship had sailed, to go on board of her the first thing, and intercept the fugitives. He would either induce his wife to return and wait for the vessel on which he had originally fixed, or he would insist on taking his passage in her ship, and sailing with her and her father.

When Sir William arrived, he found not only that the ship was out of the Mersey, but that the pilot had returned, and there was no hope of his overtaking her. Indeed, she had gone even before Lady Thwaite arrived; but her ladyship had been equal to the occasion, and was so resolute in her purpose that she had hired a boat and followed in time to be taken on board when the pilot was dismissed.

There was no good in rushing to Ireland, for the ship was not to touch there. Much displeased and disheartened, Sir William stayed on for a time at the first railway hotel he had entered. He made inquiries about the next vessel to sail for America, and settled to go with a screw steamer in the course of the following week, without returning to White-hills to show 'his diminished face' there. He would leave all the concluding arrangements, as to the letting of the house, and the supplying him from time to time with funds, to Mr. Miles, and he would write and summon Bill Rogers, who was to be his fellow-voyager.

The weather was now fine, even balmy for the season; the equinoctial gales had blown by. Sir William had not so much as the sardonic satisfaction of reflecting that Honor in her first experience of sea-sickness might be ruining her wilfulness in giving him the slip—she had hardly ever been ill in her life before—and that subdued by circumstances she might miss him, and repent of her rash separation from him.

The forsaken husband was loitering about the docks, when he became aware of a certain ferment and stir among the dockyard labourers.

He heard fragments of seafaring talk ; one old man said to another :

‘ There a’ been nothin’ like it, Ben, sin’ the last runnin’ down off the Kent coast, or the sinkin’ of the *Princess Alice* in the Thames.’

‘ Took her right in the waist, Joe,’ answered his mate, ‘ and clipped her there so that her were not only stove in, but parted midship and went down in two bits, one after t’other like two stones. There weren’t no time to sing out for help, even if t’other vessel hadn’t sailed on, as fast as she could run, and never looked behind her. Not more than a couple of boats could be got down, and they do say nine-tenths of the whole lot of them poor people are in Davy’s locker by this time.’

‘ Right of sea-way, do you say ? That ain’t a question will be tackled in our day, Joe—not till lords and ladies and princes and princesses ’ave had their turn of clustering like bees about the gangway with their screams horful as them that a’ heerd do tell. Bless ee ! what do the sinking of an immigrant ship or two, ’cause of want of rule of right of sea-way, make to the Lords and Commons ?’

Sir William stood as if nailed to the spot,

with his heart failing him for fear of what had befallen some unhappy voyagers. He could make out the talk to refer to a collision of ships at sea, with great loss of life. On inquiry, he learnt a few more details ; that right of way which may be even more fatally neglected or misunderstood on water than on land, had been disregarded or blundered over once again. Two vessels—the one foreign, the other an English emigrant ship—had run foul of each other in a fog off the Welsh coast. The foreigner had drawn off little injured, and sailed away like a cowardly depredator and wanton murderer. The emigrant ship had suddenly parted midships, settled, and sunk, before more than a couple of boats could be lowered and put off. Of a great living freight sailing along without a dream of danger—no storm in the sky, no heaving, tossing sea, neither rocks nor breakers ahead, the mother country still in sight—the mass had perished.

The words ‘emigrant ship’ caused Sir William to clench his teeth to keep in a cry. The name? There was no doubt of it. The name was that of the vessel in which his wife and her father had sailed. But still there

was a glimmer of hope.. Two boat-loads of passengers had escaped. Boats from other ships on the same course might have picked up such of the shipwrecked men and women as could swim, or keep themselves afloat for a space, in a sea 'as calm as a pond.' Nay, it was reported that some persons in the emigrant ship at the moment of collision had leapt on board the other vessel, which had taken itself off.

There was no printed list as yet of the passengers saved, but it would be published as soon as authentic intelligence could be procured ; and there would be no difficulty in reaching the little village on the Welsh coast, the nearest point to the scene of the accident.

Sir William made one in a terror-stricken, half-despairing little crowd of relations and friends. Scarcely recovered from the pang of temporary parting, they hurried in hot haste to the locality of the disaster to ascertain if the parting had been for ever in this world, and to exchange the passing pang for the weeping which would not be comforted, for those who were not.

The tale conveyed to Liverpool was found

substantially correct. There was still great uncertainty with regard to the fate of individuals; but the many bodies already washed on shore served not merely as grievous confirmation to the heavy loss of life, but bore melancholy testimony to the final chapter in the history of not a few men and women.

Sir William received his answer in the first ghastly row of corpses he inspected. It came to him in the spectacle of a drowned young woman, of fine physique, with a marriage ring on the third finger of one brown hand. She had on a dark dress, with which had been worn a bright-coloured neckerchief still knotted about the throat. The rich colour had been washed out of the cheeks and lips; the grey eyes looked up without speculation in their congealed depths. But there was no disfiguring mark on the still face, and there was eternal peace in the breast which heaved no longer. He had followed her full of justifiable anger, but there was no room for anger or for anything save immeasurable sorrow when he overtook her. Of what use had been the splendid strength which had not preserved the brave life for a little hour? She had saved another from a more dangerous pond

than that pond-like sea, but she could not save herself. Why had he not been at hand to repay the life she had given back to him? Was it always to be thus in his history, that the women who saved him were to suffer and die as their part in the salvation?

Old Abe's body was not to be found, and without waiting to search for it, Sir William did indeed carry home his wife to Whitehills—but it was in her coffin. There was a great talk, much scandal, and some pity excited by her untimely end. There was a funeral at Whitehills to which some of Sir William's neighbours and social equals—among them Mr. Hollis, came uninvited, and to which he himself bade those of the Quarry men who had been Honor's relations and friends. But though the widower, silent and stern in his suffering, ordered that the late Lady Thwaite's remaining kindred and former associates should return with him to the house and have refreshments set before them, he himself did not eat or drink with them, and he took his last leave of his guests on the threshold.

'You were no true friends to Lady Thwaite,' he said coldly; 'she owed it at the last. You know she quitted the country without

saying good-bye to one of you. You are no friends of mine that I should ever seek to see you again—still, I have had you here to-day, because blood is thicker than water, and because, admitting my own misdoings, I bear no ill-will to you. And if you can point out at any time a way in which I can really help you, I will do it, for her sake who was a link between us, since she, my wife, counted kin with you.'

The Quarry folk departed, discomfited and affronted. They wanted none of his help, or his sauce either. What was he to come it over them with his taunts and lectures? they blustered amongst themselves. They supposed they were not to have another blow out when old Abe's carcase cast up—he was to be buried like a dog. But they would not suffer it. They would bury old Abe like one of themselves, and drink themselves blind in his honour, to shame the turn-coat Squire, with his wet and his dry bouts, his sinning and repenting.

But in spite of Sir William's efforts and offers of reward the remains of old Abe never 'cast up,' so as to be disposed of honourably or dishonourably. He either slept as quietly as many another at the bottom of the sea, or

his unidentified body filled a pauper's grave, or it was just possible he escaped, and vanished into obscurity. He had the secretiveness, love of mystery, intrigue, and sensation, the restlessness and fitfulness inherited from an ancient migratory, predatory race, either altogether unsettled, or settled for a time as squatters. He had transmitted some of the traits to his daughter, intermingled with the headstrong impulses of a warmer, more faithful heart, and a more generous temper, a union still more perilous than the tendencies taken singly.

If Abe did survive the destruction of the *Geoffrey Hudson* his dislike of being looked after, cared for, or, as he would have considered, shelved, and perhaps his apprehension of Sir William's anger, because Abe had abetted his daughter and furthered the scheme which had cost her life, prevented the old man from ever reporting himself to his son-in-law, and claiming his assistance. Like a waif, or the wild, hairy creature of the woods, which the little ex-gamekeeper had first appeared to the master on whom he had preyed, Abe drifted away into oblivion, replaced, as his predecessors the squatters had been, by more reasonable and steadier sons of the soil.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FUGITIVE IN BROAD DAY.

THE fugitive was not Sir William ; he stayed on at Whitehills as if he meant to stay there for the rest of his life. He had given up his scheme of emigration, and after his short scandalous outbreak and his wife's death, settled down as he had done on his arrival in the neighbourhood. But though he had made no inroads to speak of on his fortune during his brief prodigal madness, he took no steps to reorganize or replenish the ranks of his household, which had fallen into still further disorder, and been diminished to the last degree in the prospect of Sir William and Lady Thwaite's leaving the country. In fact Sir William's establishment now consisted of an old woman, with a girl to help her, and Bill Rogers. With this moiety the master of

the house appeared satisfied, leading as he did the life of a recluse.

This went on for nearly two years. Mr. Miles came down on business occasionally, and tried to prove his client's reformation and his own trust in its permanency, by seeking to draw out Sir William afresh, and by endeavouring to interest him in county matters, and in his duties as a landlord. So far as that went Sir William was amenable to influence. While he read more than ever, he strove harder to lay himself open to every source of intelligent observation and occupation around him, and to comply with all the obligations that could reasonably be required of him, not living for himself alone, but for others. He began to rebuild the half-finished houses, he dabbled in the allotment system, he showed interest in the decisions of the justices. He met his neighbours again on these grounds, and, after the first blush, overcame his reluctance to encounter them, displaying to them something of the dearly bought obliviousness and blunt superiority to manners and fashions generally, which were partly the results of passing a second time through the fires of remorse and unappeasable regret. In the

light of the errors he had committed and the losses he had sustained, the infringement of any of the superficial forms which ought to enclose solid realities, but are in themselves the sum-total of life to many persons, dwindled into insignificance.

But Sir William's complacency ended there, though the most of his neighbours would have been well enough pleased to have granted him further grace, even to have ventured on re-admitting him to the sanctuary of their homes. These magnates were coming round to the conclusion that Sir William had sown his wild oats in one crop, that it was all the result of his miserable marriage from which he had got a deliverance, for his low-born wife was dead. He was living once more as quietly and soberly as a judge. Even though he were to practise less austerity he would still be an eligible partner. Was he not Sir William Thwaite, of Whitehills? and did it not betray a shocking want of charity not to believe in the sincerity and enduring nature of his repentance? The poor young fellow had suffered from his disadvantages in early life. After his arrival at Whitehills he had, unhappily, fallen among thieves in more instances than one.

The speakers would mention no names, and they did not propose to confound the innocent with the guilty; but everybody knew a certain terrible old lady whose bow and spear had brought down heaps of victims in her day. Sir William had escaped with the skin of his teeth from all his perils, and it was the duty of every good Christian and good neighbour, after a sufficient interval had passed to test his reformation—for no necessary precaution was spared—to welcome back the prodigal, and encourage him in the way he should go.

But Sir William declined every social overture, not so much rudely as with calm persistence, that foiled and wore out the most persevering endeavours. He did not even make the exceptions he had allowed himself three years before. Lady Thwaite, Sir John's widow, had returned from Rome long ago; but though Sir William's carriages and the produce of his hot-houses were once more at her disposal, no little notes, clever manœuvres, or frank advances would induce him either to go to her at Netherton, or to receive her and authorize her interference in the domestic economy of Whitehills.

The cool motions which old Lady Fermor

made to Sir William to renew his intercourse with Lambford fared still worse. There was a rumour that he not only declined all her invitations, but passed her carriage with a bow, though its mistress hailed him in a voice which might have been heard a mile off. What better could have been expected from the plain man with whom she had played like a wicked, hoary-headed enchantress, whom she had beguiled with lures which her granddaughter disowned?

Sir William was never seen within the Rectory, though he had resumed his attendance at church, had gone to vestry meetings, and was ready with help for the parish poor when it was called for.

If Sir William enjoyed the respite from neighbourly visiting, there was another person, had he known it, the last he would have exposed to suffer on his account, who was punished for his remissness. Lady Fermor's anger against Iris had taken the form of persecution, and assumed some of the features of a craze. Is it a proof that our natural normal state ought to be one of healthy-minded fairness and human kindness, when, in all cases of crying injustice and cruelty, a strain of

madness is said to creep in, till it becomes difficult to separate the depraved morals and the absence of natural feeling from the dis-tempered brain? Witness the worst of the popes, emperors, kings, and queens, including John of England and Isabeau of France. Old Lady Fermor, who had formerly simply neglected Iris, and who had shown some capacity of toleration where what the girl's grandmother classed as fanaticism and obstinacy of temper were concerned, now set upon her grand-daughter day after day, taunted her with barbarous taunts, vouchsafed the agreeable information that Iris's father had ended by despising and detesting her mother, and added to it the comfortable sequel that the Hon. Mrs. Compton had cared nothing for her child, and had thrown it a dead-weight upon her mother. Lady Fermor reverted shamelessly to the shameful passages in her own life, in the hearing of the pure ears that tingled with horror and affront. She dwelt on hereditary taints and hereditary spotted reputations until Iris grew sick with loathing at the infamy in which she felt hopelessly entangled, in spite of her utter revolt against its foulness and baseness, and her cry day and night to

the God of righteousness, who has declared it is not His will that because the fathers have eaten sour grapes the children's teeth shall be set on edge. 'Lord, Thou wilt hold me up. Thou wilt sooner send the Angel of Death to set me free,' prayed the poor girl.

Lady Fermor's last deliberate, well-nigh insane sin against the grand-daughter in her power to be tortured, was that in place of shielding her from such contaminating association as Lady Fermor had protected her from hitherto, the mistress of Lambford threw Iris in the way of Major Pollock, who continued after Lord Fermor's death the one constant male *habitué* of the house. All her life long Iris had experienced an extreme repugnance and positive dread of this man. Whatever he had been by birth, he had long sunk into a coarse profligate, a detected black-leg, a wolf that preyed on any silly sheep which came within its toils. He was a disgrace to the town of Knotley, which yet tolerated him because of the *prestige* of his original rank, his supposed knowledge of the great world (on the evil side), and his connection with such a house as Lambford. There was hardly a redeeming trait to be

discovered among his leers and sneers, his cheatery, effrontery, and profanity. Iris's recoil was the instinctive shrinking of good from unmixed evil over which it has no power.

Yet it was for this man, old enough to be Iris's father, brutalized by a lengthened career of vice and debauchery, impoverished by such riot as was within his reach, that Lady Fermor now affected to destine her grandchild.

The mistress of Lambford, as it seemed, half in cruel jest, half in more cruel earnest, in the frenzy which had taken possession of her, ceased to encourage any other visitor at the house. She refused to let Iris go to Lady Thwaite at Netherton, or to the Actons at the Rectory, compelling her to sit and talk with the worst of companions, and to make herself conspicuous by walking, riding, and driving with this reprobate, till the girl was half mad with fright and disgust.

There are exhausted states of the bodily constitution which medical men assert are favourable to the sowing of the seeds of disease. In the same way there are depressed conditions of the mind after it has been subjected to prolonged trial, when it loses its capacity to balance probabilities, and readily

falls a victim to panics. People who remembered Iris's mother during her last visit to Lambford began to remark that her daughter was acquiring the same harassed, hunted look, which, if it settled down on her face, would go far to spoil its sweet, bright beauty. Why, she was not twenty-three years of age, yet she was fast losing colour and flesh, and would be faded and pinched before she had attained the fulness of womanhood. Lucy Acton was vexed by the change, but she could do nothing, even if her hands had not been very full with a contumacious curate, a twist in the smooth running of her Dorcas Society, and a proposal for pauper boarding out where her pauper children were concerned. In the circumstances, Lucy could not press the claims of friendship, or maintain a vigilant watch over Iris in this crisis of her life; just as many excellent persons cannot keep up their private correspondence, or dispense hospitality, or practise common consideration for old friends, because of engrossing so-called evangelizing and charitable engagements. These worthy individuals forget somehow that though charity abroad is a good thing, true charity begins nearest home.

Lady Fermor only noticed the alteration in her grand-daughter's looks to make use of it in her gibes.

‘Well, Iris, you were a poor enough affair at the best, but I think I had a right to expect that you would keep what little looks you had till you were turned five-and-twenty. I was as young as ever at five-and-forty. But I see I must look sharp and dispose of you while I can, before you go off entirely, since I wish no old maids left on my hands, even though I could live to provide for them—which I won’t, girl; there are more to profit by my savings, on which you have got your eye, no doubt, than you. I have had little to do with the Dugdales and Powells, but they are my grandchildren too, all the same. My lord left what he could at my discretion, and I can tell you he cared more for my blood than his own. He would have preferred a dog of mine to a child of his first wife’s—if she had borne him one. It did not matter greatly to him that his blood flowed in your veins. He took my view of you as a troublesome, perverse minx of a girl. If there had been a likely lad among the Dugdales and Powells, I should have sent all your brats of girls to the right-about, but

my ill-fortune has followed me through two generations, with troops of useless girls as my sole descendants. However, if you think I am going to make an eldest grandson of you, then you are mightily mistaken. It is no matter that I don't believe I should know a Dugdale or a Powell girl if I saw her. I suppose they all take after their maternal grandfather, and are a flat-footed, round-nosed, blinking-eyed set.'

'I have never seen them,' said Iris faintly.

'I dare say not,' exclaimed her grandmother scornfully. 'Do you think they count you a relation of theirs? They may condone what they are pleased to consider my offences, because I can do something for them if I choose; but what on earth should induce them to forget that you are the wild Lord Fermor's grand-daughter, while they are the grandchildren of that wronged saint, Bennet of Hyndcoomb.'

'Grandmamma,' said Iris, with a gasp, 'I have never sought to stand in my cousins' way. If there is any wrong to be redressed, then for mercy's sake let it be done, and don't mind me.'

'And, pray, what do you intend should

become of you?' retorted Lady Fermor, in place of being softened, more contemptuous than ever. 'I dare say you are mean enough—good girls are generally sneaky—to think of becoming a pensioner on Tom Mildmay, the new lord, whose aunt I superseded. Child, it is not in nature. He barely tolerates you, and his wife hates you like poison.'

'I shall not be a pensioner on anybody,' said Iris, with grave determination and more spirit.

'And what position do you hold to me, may I ask?' demanded her grandmother, with mock deference. 'I have plenty of holes to put my money in without their ever becoming filled up. It is not a pure pleasure for me to provide for a girl, and endure her namby-pamby, priggish company after she has disobeyed and offended me, and spoilt a finer fellow than she was worthy of, according to the dictates of her conscience and religion, of course. No, no, I see nothing for it but that I should hand you over to old Pollock. He will take you with a small gratuity. He can keep a roof over his head, and I dare say over yours, which will soon be as much as a scarecrow of a girl of our family is entitled to

ask, for barring our looks and a mouthful of common-sense—which some of us don't possess—we are nowhere. He may be better able to manage you than a poor doting woman over fourscore years can aspire to do,' with a sudden assumption of extreme age and weakness.

Still the probabilities, if Iris Compton had only been able to take them into consideration, were all against Lady Fermor's going farther than threaten her grand-daughter with this last horrible injury. It was a free country, in which no woman could be compelled to marry any man, good or bad, against her will. Public opinion would cry out against Lady Fermor, and although she had defied it in her prime, in the strength of her will and passion, she was not likely to set it at nought for so small a gain as the punishment and degradation of a refractory descendant. Lady Fermor had always kept her eyes open with regard to worldly advantages and disadvantages. Major Pollock had none of the first to recommend him, and the chance was, as the old lady well knew, that if she were so reckless and if she possessed the power to bring about a disgraceful, unsuitable marriage between him and Iris,

she would find him the most impudent and inveterate parasite a tie of relationship ever permitted to fasten on the head of a house.

But Iris was no longer able to reason on the dangers which she wildly exaggerated. Her home was becoming intolerable to her. It needed but one more indignity and forestalling of future misery to drive her to extreme measures.

Lady Fermor had gone for her afternoon drive to Knotley when rain came on. She made her coachman stop at Major Pollock's door. She said she feared the wet, and was too stiff to alight. She would sit there and have a cup of tea handed to her by the gentleman of the house, who had come out to attend his patroness. But her grandmother ordered Iris to alight, go in with Major Pollock, and sit down with him at his table.

Iris could not escape compliance, unless she was prepared to engage in a discreditable contention in the public street. She was forced to cross the threshold which no respectable woman in any class was in the habit of passing. She did not tarry above a few minutes. Even Major Pollock seemed put out, and did not urge her to sit down; but when she came

back, pale and trembling, her grandmother had another order to give her. Iris was to take the carriage-umbrella and go on and do what shopping Lady Fermor wished to have done, while she drove slowly after her granddaughter—till Iris could re-enter the carriage. Would Major Pollock be so good as to accompany Miss Compton, hold the umbrella above her head, and lend her his arm, as she had not been strong lately, and was not looking well?

In vain Iris protested she could hold the umbrella and walk by herself perfectly well. She was compelled to parade the streets—empty because of the rain, but commanded by a double row of windows, and enter shop after shop with her escort.

He was not the man to fail long in presuming on his opportunities, though he was likely to make a more correct estimate of the situation, and to calculate, without grossly blundering, the length and breadth of Lady Fermor's old-standing favour for him, and dislike to her grand-daughter.

.. 'Upon my word, Miss Compton, this is nice and cosy to have you tucked like an unruly chick under my arm, and to be sent

to go messages with you turtle-dove fashion. We must be better friends. Come, I prophesied we should when you paid me a compliment at your ball an age ago. I don't think you've paid me another till to-day, but better late than never, when the old lady is so jollily set on our friendship. There is no saying where it may end. Why don't we make common cause? and I'll fight your battles with my old termagant. Better broken ships than none, young lady. I am not the only reformed scamp in the neighbourhood, but there is a distinction which my lady is able to appreciate. While a certain gentleman is safe to go on sulking to the end of the chapter, I'm at your feet—'pon my soul I am!—whenever you condescend to hold out your hand to me. And though you're young and fair, and an angel, and all that sort of bosh, and Lord and Lady Fermor's grand-daughter, which is more to the purpose, and entitles you to some line, by Jove! you owe me compensation for past airs, Miss Compton.'

When Iris got into the carriage and it drove off, leaving Major Pollock behind, she heard Lady Fermor chuckle: 'I have given the Knotley gossips something to talk about. The

women in our family never missed affording ground for talk. The public owe us a vote of thanks on that account, and if I have taken down a little of your squeamishness and high-mindedness, Miss Compton, you ought to be obliged to me also.'

Iris was silent. She entered no protest, she heard no further word. She was pressing her hands to her forehead and taking a desperate resolution. 'I am of age; I am my own mistress, with any little gain that implies. It cannot be right to live on with grandmamma and tempt her to behave to me as she has done—to compass, if that were possible, her shocking suggestion. I cannot die when I wish. I cannot go to the Actons, I should only compromise the Rector and Lucy, entangle them in a family quarrel, and if they were to take my part, form a bad precedent for all the family quarrels in the parish. Lucy does not know, and how could I ever pollute her mind as mine has been polluted? Will it ever be clean, fearless and God-trusting again? Lucy would advise me to stay on with grandmamma and be good, and seek to do her good. Ah! it is not so easy to be good and do good as Lucy imagines. She would laugh at the

mention of Major Pollock as a child's bogie. She would charge me to be patient where patience is of no avail. I cannot speak to Ada, Lady Thwaite; she would dislike getting into an awkward predicament, interfering between relations, helping to make mischief—as if there were any left to be made—between a grandmother and a grand-daughter whom the grandmother has brought up; and Lady Thwaite would be right, according to the sound of the thing. Grandmamma is so very old that nobody would believe what power she retains as she sits there. It seems doubly heartless to turn upon her and abandon her to hired servants. If the other Lady Thwaite, poor Honor, had lived and remained at Whitehills, she would have dared to come over to Lambford and beard grandmamma, fetch me away before her face, and lavish upon me all the poor shelter she could provide. I must go away from them all; I must earn my own bread. Surely I can do it if thousands of women earn theirs. But I shall tell grandmamma first. I don't know if she will seek to prevent me, if she care enough to try, except to maintain her rule; but if she should shut me up, then it will be time enough to

think of fleeing like a culprit in secret and in the dark.'

Secrecy and darkness were utterly foreign to Iris's nature. They were among the bugbears which she would abhor and shun to her dying day. Therefore she arranged for her departure from Lambford, not so much in an orderly and methodical manner, but on principles of her own which took even her graceless old enemy by surprise, much more so than if the unhappy girl had absconded under cloud of night.

The fugitive waited till the morning that the sun and her fellow-creatures might see her set forth. She spent a wakeful night for the most part packing such clothes, books, and trifling possessions as she felt entitled to take with her. But she scrupulously and tenderly respected her grandmother's times for sleep and breakfast. 'Grandmamma must be refreshed and at her best,' the rebel said. 'She may feel my going in a way; she may be stirred up to oppose me. I must take care of doing her harm.' Therefore it was at high noon that Iris, in her linen morning-gown and straw hat, with her dust-cloak over her arm, knocked and

sought permission to speak with Lady Fermor.

The room, according to its wont, was bare of all beautiful and gentle associations, though supplied with every luxury. Lady Fermor sat muffled up in the glare of the mingled sunlight and firelight, which on another would have fallen fiercely, but in her only aroused a grateful torpid warmth, while it lit up with ghastly illumination her shrivelled parchment skin, pronounced brows and false teeth and hair. She was revolving old memories and twirling her thumbs, and at first only bestowed a supercilious glance on her grand-daughter.

Lady Fermor was roused to attention by the thrill in Iris's voice when she said, with all the calmness she could command :

‘I am going away, grandmamma. I do not see how we can live together any longer. I am very sorry that I have not been more of a comfort and pleasure to you ; but since it is not so, and our differences are becoming worse every day, it is better for me to quit Lambford.’

‘And this is all the thanks I get for having brought you up, Iris Compton—this is all your gratitude?’ said Lady Fermor, leaning

back in her easy-chair and crossing her hands in her lap.

Iris might have inquired what she had received to be grateful for which her grandmother could have decently kept back. But she was of another mind.

‘I am not ungrateful; I know you have had a great deal of trouble with me,’ she said humbly, ‘and my heart is sore that it should end like this.’

‘I don’t want any of your whining and cant,’ said Lady Fermor fiercely. ‘I wash my hands of you from this day. I don’t care what becomes of you, and you may go to the deuce for me. You know, and I know, it won’t be an honest road long, least of all after such vile ingratitude. I have only one stipulation to make, since it is your modest little game to set out on your travels in broad day and call as much attention to the proceedings as possible, you shan’t leave Lambford in the guise of a beggar, or a mock nurse in a hospital, or a sister in a nunnery, or whatever other silly example you may choose to follow, and so bring further disgrace upon me. You’ll be so good as to leave this house dressed like a lady, and you

will do me the favour of making use of the carriage to the train. I suppose you mean to journey by rail, and not on foot like an ordinary vagabond ?'

Iris went back to her room, and with fingers that would hardly do her will, changed her dress for the last elaborate costume in dove-coloured cashmere and silk, which her grandmother had ordered for her.

As Iris was doing Lady Fermor's bidding, Soames made a solemn muffled appeal for admittance. She brought on a salver an open cheque for fifty pounds, and a slip of paper on which was written: 'This is the last you shall have from me. Make the best or the worst you can of it. Don't disturb me by further leave-takings, I have had enough of them, and I don't choose they should spoil my luncheon.'

Iris took up the cheque and put it down again ; it was her grandfather's money, and yet she felt as if it burnt her fingers. She looked wistfully in Soames's face.

'I have to go back to my lady instantly, in case what has happened should be too much for her,' said the woman in a strictly official tone, taking her stand on being on

duty. 'Good-bye, miss. If I may be so bold, I wish you an 'appy journey.'

On the whole, Soames was relieved by Iris's going away; but she did not wish to know more of the step, since the knowledge might get her into a scrape. Her greedy eyes grudged the grand-daughter of the house the large cheque, but the maid must not imperil the annuity for which she had already paid dearly.

The suspicion that Miss Compton might be going away for good, remained confined to the cold and cautious breast of Soames. The other servants were baffled and put on a false scent by the circumstances of the dress, the carriage, and the hour, under which Iris set out. The old cook, the footman whose life Iris had saved, Jenny Rogers who was her young mistress's special favourite, all supposed, and kindly welcomed the supposition, that some sudden visiting expedition had been fixed on by Lady Fermor for her grand-daughter. 'She will be all the better for it, poor dear young lady,' they settled cordially among themselves. 'She leads a deal harder life than any of us, that she do ; and she has not been looking well of late,

but a change will set her up.' Thus it happened that Iris, the friendliest of human beings, departed from the place which had been her home for nearly the whole of her young life, without a tear shed for her sake, without a caress, or a blessing, or a God speed, beyond Soames's ceremonious measured good wishes.

Though it had been her own doing that she should go like this, and she felt that she could not act otherwise than as became an honourable and innocent girl, she was impressed by the desolation of the step she was taking, while it lacked the engrossing excitement of a clandestine adventure shrouded in gloom that might be dispersed at any moment with the escapade discovered and arrested.

There was less shame with less uncertainty. Iris had not taken advantage of age, or betrayed a trust or transmitted a legacy of bewilderment, doubt, even terror to the dwellers at Lambford. But did nobody care what became of her? Was there not one to ask where she was going—a lonely girl into the wide world? It was unreasonable in her to put such questions when actually nobody

save her grandmother and Soames had any suspicion of the true nature of the case. Poor Lucy would be grieved and perhaps hurt beyond propitiation, because the advice which she gave so glibly had not been sought. The Rector and Mrs. Acton, too, might blame Iris, and resent her lack of confidence in them. Yet, it had been a hard struggle for her to be silent under the desire of saving them, burdened as they were with many cares, from fresh trouble, in a hopeless contest with Lady Fermor—above all when it would seem like a clerical and parental obligation laid on them to enforce the old lady's authority, though their hearts should be with Iris in her distress. As for King Lud, he had been gone on a long cruise ; and though his ship was again in harbour, he had not yet returned to the Rectory.

Iris felt she ought to have been thankful that she had implicated nobody in her misdemeanour, that she was going away with her grandmother's knowledge and in a sense with her consent, and that her last act in relation to Lady Fermor had been one of obedience to her wishes.

It was a grey cloudy day, with soft subdued

light and shade, and the birds singing as they do in such a premature long-drawn-out gloaming, when Iris in her solitary state drove along the wide grass-bordered roads, through the pastures and downs and occasional corn-fields. She had selected—with a sense of strangeness in having the privilege of selection—Cavesham instead of Knotley for her station, because of a violent apprehension which still harassed her, and caused her to shrink with a nervous horror from the most distant chance of encountering Major Pollock, though she had no just cause to fear the encounter. He could not stop her flight. It would not even matter though he should convey to her grandmother the information that he had seen her departure.

While Iris avoided Major Pollock, she could not altogether shake off a delusion, though she knew it to be a delusion. She fancied that the people whom she passed were looking at her; that they were surprised to see her alone, and wondered why she came to Cavesham, instead of the usual station for the Lambford household; that they were suspecting a family quarrel, and watching with idle yet oppressive curiosity her every movement.

She had no doubt what she would do to begin with, for her mind, naturally courageous, quick and fertile in resource, had decided promptly within a few minutes of her having come to the conclusion that she must act for herself and go away from Lambford.

Iris was unacquainted with her cousins, the Dugdales and Powells, and her grandmother had told her, what was too probable, that they would not acknowledge her as a relation. She knew her other cousin, the present Lord Fermor; she was conscious that he had been politely passive in his bearing towards her, but unless in the last necessity she would not appeal to him, though she believed that in spite of some faults and his wife's influence, he was on the whole an upright, tolerably humane man. Iris had been brought up in the practice of patience and long-suffering, but even the meekest will turn in self-defence, especially when the meekness is co-existent with a strong sense of justice and generosity. Iris was even passionately indignant with the wholesale condemnation and loose summing up of offences and offenders which had been displayed in the Mildmays' dealings with her. Besides, she could not commit the last wrong

against her grandmother which would be implied in Iris's addressing herself to Lady Fermor's natural enemy and claiming his protection. Lady Fermor, whatever she had done, remained Iris's mother's mother, her nearest relative, the guardian of her childhood and youth, as the old woman had so often reminded the girl lately with cruel reproaches. Nothing could do away with that obligation, which entered like iron into Iris's soul, so that under the sharp smarting of the wound there was little probability of her forgetting a duty which, according to her notions, was still paramount.

To expose her grandmother, if Iris could prevent it, especially to expose her relative to her greatest foe, would be to expose herself, so the girl argued, to the well-warranted charge of household baseness.

Iris was shut up to one course. Her old friend, Miss Burrage, had a sister in London who kept a boarding-house in which the girl and her governess had once lived for a few days. Iris would go to Fitzroy Square, to Mrs. Haigh, who knew all about Iris Compton, and would surely receive her without difficulty. Perhaps Mrs. Haigh would help Iris to look

about and find some way of working for her living, since fifty pounds and the small sum left of her last quarter's allowance, with which she had intended to pay her expenses to London, would not last for ever. It did not strike Iris that there would be anything degrading in entering the great army of workers, though she had the sense to anticipate that there might be much that was not agreeable, that was trying and full of drudgery. She even failed to see, and there was considerable simplicity and short-sightedness in the failure, that Lady Fermor was certain to regard the project with the utmost hostility. On the contrary, the wanderer sought to pacify her tender conscience, and the aching longing of her affectionate heart, by telling herself that she might soon write to Lucy Acton, when the Rector, if he saw fit, could inform Lady Fermor that Iris was well, and able to maintain herself.

But Iris, in her ignorance, thought less of these questions than of the strangeness of her solitude and independence as she left the carriage and entered the station, took out her ticket for London, and paced up and down the most secluded end of the platform. Did

the man in the ticket-office recognise her, and regard it as odd that she should be travelling alone, which she had never done before? Was the stationmaster keeping his eye upon her, or did he direct the porters to do it? She saw one of her fellow-travellers, a harmless-looking middle-class woman, surreptitiously reading the address on Iris's portmanteau. It might be to gratify idle curiosity, at the same time the action was suspicious. Yet why should she mind, even though what she dreaded, next to being followed by Major Pollock, came to pass, and some of her personal acquaintances—Lady Thwaite, or one of the Hollises, or even an officer from Birkett—were to appear through the archway? None of them could interfere to prevent her departure, not even though she or he knew all about it, that Iris Compton was not coming back, that she had only her old governess's sister, whom Iris had seen but once nine years ago, for a friend in need with whom to take refuge.

But was Iris really going away from Lambford, from Eastham, from country sights and sounds, and all she had ever known and loved? She stooped, as she pondered over what seemed still impossible, and gathered a

daisy that grew on the railway bank. Was she bound for the great city, with its swarming population, in which she would be the merest unit? Or was it no more than a vexed, confused dream, from which she should awaken presently?

Iris's perturbed half-incredulous reflections were brought to an end by the arrival of the train. Amidst the little stir of arriving and departing passengers, she stepped into an empty carriage, and seated herself, but rose the next moment and stood in the doorway, impelled by the recollection that since there was no one to look after the luggage she ought to attend to it. Nothing had been left on the platform, the train was moving, and she drew back just as she caught a glimpse of a familiar face, the owner of which was coming leisurely into the station. The face was the homely but trustworthy visage of Jenny Rogers's brother Bill, Sir William Thwaite's man-servant.

Then the engine steamed off, carrying the travellers fast into the unknown, and the marvel of the expedition, the adventure of it, began to seize hold of the brave spirit, to

fascinate and excite it, at the same time that a great trust in the Father of the fatherless, and the Brother of all His desolate brothers and sisters, rose in her soul and stilled its tribulation.

END OF VOL. II.



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